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**Paradoxical Christianity and Apocalyptic Vision in the
Later Works of August Strindberg**

by Bjorn-Gustav Theodore Malekin

Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The Centre for Literature, Theology and the Arts

Department of Theology

University of Glasgow

April 2007

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Abstract

Following an acute crisis, a number of the later works of August Strindberg became marked by a deep religiosity, at once Christian and eclectic. The religious turn, evident in a number of his later plays, is accompanied by a radical development of Strindberg's dramaturgy in his "dream plays." These imaginative, poetic plays disrupt logical narrative and character-development. In effect they undermine the salvific motifs woven into the fabric of these writings. These are paradoxically Christian, therefore, because although intensely religious, they are dramas that take place after the death of God. Drawing on Strindberg's paintings and novels as well as his plays, this thesis investigates the ramifications of the death of God in a number of Strindberg's later plays. To do so it also draws on the writings of both theologians and dramatic practitioners who all in their different ways are responding to the same situation confronted in Strindberg's writing. In doing so, it emerges how far Strindberg anticipates the religious and spiritual crises of the following century. Finally, I attempt to put Strindberg into the context of the post-postmodern condition, reflecting both on what this has to say to Strindberg, and what Strindberg has to say to it.

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I owe a number of debts: first of all to my father, Peter Malekin, for financial and moral support over the course of my research; secondly, to Dr Kiyoshi Tsuchiya, who acted as my supervisor when I first came to Glasgow; thirdly, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Professor David Jasper, who took over as my supervisor when Dr Tsuchiya left the department. Without his patient support and encouragement, not to mention his probing questions (and an ever-extending reading list), I would never have completed this thesis. Finally, I have to thank my wife for unending support, and for reading a number of chapters and offering numerous helpful comments.

A note on the texts and translations used

Until recently, the standard Swedish edition of Strindberg was the *Samlade Skrifter*, edited by John Landquist. This has now been supplanted by the "national edition," the *Samlade Verk*. The latter amounts to seventy-two volumes, a few of which have yet to be published. Whilst Glasgow University Library has a number of volumes from the *Samlade Verk*, it has far from a full collection. On the other hand, although it does not have any of the Landquist edition, it does contain a complete set of the *Skrifter*, edited by the eminent Strindberg scholar Gunnar Brandell. In doing this thesis, I have had to use whatever copy came to hand. Hence I sometimes refer to the *Skrifter*, sometimes the *Samlade Verk*, and sometimes to paperback editions of the plays. On other occasions I have had recourse to privately owned volumes from the *Samlade Skrifter*. This is admittedly messy, but was unfortunately the best way to make use of the resources available to me. Strindberg's letters, however, are referred to in the standard edition edited by Torsten Eklund and Björn Meidal. I refer to them in the footnotes as *Brev*.

In some places I have used translations. The principle I used here was always to refer to the original Swedish for the texts that form the main subject of this thesis. For some of Strindberg's other writings, such as his first major play *Master Olof* and his *Inferno* (which he in fact wrote in French) I have used English translations. Finally, I have also referred to the original Swedish for works outside the main focus of this thesis where no English translation was available. This was the case with Strindberg's letters and his *A Blue Book*. When a reference does not mention a

translator, the translation is my own. In these cases I have tried to make the translation as literal as possible without losing the sense of the Swedish.

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1. Introduction

The Swedish playwright, poet, painter, essayist and novelist, August Strindberg, reverted to Christianity in 1896. He was by this time living as an exile in Paris, a notorious misogynist, blasphemer and atheist. Internationally, he had made his name as a writer with a series of violent and compelling naturalistic dramas. However, by the time of his conversion, he had given up literature, pursuing instead an eccentric programme of chemical and alchemical experiments and seeking (unsuccessfully) recognition as a scientist. His conversion followed a series of increasingly severe break-downs in what has come to be known as his 'Inferno-crisis'. One major consequence of this crisis and conversion was that Strindberg began to write plays again, at a frenetic pace that was even for him extraordinary. Between 1898 and 1909, Strindberg wrote history plays, fairy-tale-like pieces, and a number of bizarre quasi-religious pieces that he himself called 'dream plays.' It is a selection of the latter that this thesis investigates.

The path of Strindberg's conversion back to Christianity can seem deceptively clear. As a young man he became first a free-thinker, then an avowed atheist, but following a spiritual and psychological crisis he converted and became an avowed Christian – an experience reflected in a number of subsequent writings. However, an examination of some of Strindberg's later plays complicates this picture. His so called 'dream plays' break up their own narrative coherence along with the unity of their characters. While they recycle and rework themes of guilt and salvation, the significance of the latter in particular has shifted to the point of becoming empty of meaning. These are plays haunted by the crucifixion and the promise of atonement.

Indeed, the crucifixion comes to stand for the characteristic human experience – to live is to suffer crucifixion. But this is crucifixion without the promise of the resurrection. Rather, certain motifs and images reappear – the motif of the scapegoat, the images of crucifixion and apocalyptic fire. Instead of a narrative of salvation whose coherence as it were guarantees the authenticity of its salvific claims, these plays rehearse a partial Passion narrative in which final atonement never arrives. The breaking-up of narrative coherence with the corresponding break-down of character as a unified subject undermine the salvific themes that Strindberg explores.¹ In this, these plays confront an oddly postmodern theological predicament. The Passion narrative can no longer serve as a template for salvation. Not only this, but the language of salvation becomes paradoxical: the holy and the damned become confounded, as do Christ and Lucifer. The archetypal figure here is Cain, cursed for his fratricide, yet marked by God and therefore also holy. These paradoxes arguably exist already in the Bible, but Christianity has tended to suppress them. The telos of salvific history separates the wheat from the chaff, the holy from the damned. Strindberg's later plays throw this teleological guarantee into doubt, and so they are paradoxically religious: profoundly Christian in their focus on crucifixion at precisely the point where they threaten to undo the theological framework of Christian redemption.² Haunted by the Passion, they endlessly rehearse suspended narratives of

¹ It is true that even in his naturalistic phase character was for Strindberg incoherent and self-contradictory. By the time of the later plays, however, the context has changed. Instead of dramas that pretend to a scientific rigour, the plays I deal with are obsessed with damnation and redemption. At this point, Strindberg's views on character come into sharp contrast with the requirements of a salvific narrative, and therefore become all the more significant from a theological point of view.

This raises another question – how far were Strindberg's later, post-Inferno plays a genuine break from his earlier work? A detailed discussion of this is beyond my scope, except to observe that despite continuities that run throughout Strindberg's writings, the difference between, for example, *Miss Julie* and *To Damascus* is so obvious that I do not think it needs defending. The significance of the change in Strindberg's dramatic technique is, however, both important and fascinating. I spend some time exploring this, especially in chapter 2.

² Redemption through Christ is the central and characteristic feature of Christian orthodoxy and dogma. As such it is embedded in a coherent network of ideas – about humanity, God, history, sin – and it is

salvation. Thus, despite Strindberg's overt theism, his dream plays inhabit a different territory, that of a kind of a-theism.³

These plays, then, problematise a metaphysically coherent theology. They do so in a way that anticipates some recent responses to Christian theism. The undermining of narrative and of stable identity anticipates the postmodern dismembering of coherent, self-enclosed and self-validating texts. They do this not with postmodern glee, however, but with a mournful air. Although at times they consciously attack theology as an all-encompassing system, the dream plays long for a vanished coherence. They do so even as they undermine the claims of the grandest of grand narratives. This emerges especially in the plays' Platonic streak: parallel to the suspended narratives of salvation runs a 'broken' or 'fallen' Platonism. In his plays, Strindberg repeatedly voices the suspicion that the world is a copy; however, the copy has gone wrong. This world is made of deceitful appearances in which nothing is as it seems: rather, the world and everything in it form an unstable, ever-changing surface. The original from which the world is copied is truthful and stable, but beyond our reach. This is one dimension of the term 'dream play,' a play in which the world is perceived as dream-like appearance. These suspended narratives open a number of possible conclusions – that they are exercises in nostalgia; that they are ultimately tragic, in that they long for a stability and coherence that always remain beyond our grasp; or

the coherence of this network that had by Strindberg's time come under strain. Aspects of this network, and indeed Christianity as a coherent net of ideas, come under attack in Strindberg's work, as will become apparent in the course of this thesis. I also discuss this further later in the Introduction.

³ By this, I do not mean the kind of rationalist rejection of religion promoted by Richard Dawkins, among others. Rather, I mean an ill-defined territory suspended between the poles of theism and atheism, something like the half-belief of Peter Baelz or the a/theism of Mark C. Taylor, both of which I discuss below. In Strindberg's case, it seems to me that Christianity presented him with a Kierkegaardian either/or, but he remains suspended between them, unable to choose. I discuss this, also, below.

that an obscure salvific promise does in fact lurk, however dimly, beyond the apparently irredeemable fragmentation.

The rest of this introduction looks into the history preceding Strindberg's fracturing of coherent narrative and coherent identities. This is in part a matter of Strindberg's own personal history. Strindberg was always a highly autobiographical writer, and the religious turn of his late plays has, not surprisingly, roots in his early life. Some account of his life is therefore an indispensable background to his writings. The relation of Strindberg's life and writing is a vexed question, which we will touch on in the course of the introduction. My aim is to some extent to wrench Strindberg's writings away from his life history. The particular reason for this is that so much Strindberg scholarship, especially the earlier scholarship, reads the plays as autobiography. This biographical context can become too narrow, particularly in a study like this one where it may serve as a sort of straitjacket for the text, creating a kind of coherence in terms of Strindberg's life where in the play there is a meaningful incoherence. This is reinforced by a suspicion that taking a too biographical approach may ultimately tell us little about why anyone should read Strindberg now.

Strindberg is in some ways a very modern figure, something that will I hope emerge from what follows. In addition to Strindberg's personal history, there is a larger background to the particular form his religious turn took. This includes the influence of a number of thinkers and writers, notably Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard; and the history of Christianity and hermeneutics since the Reformation.

Strindberg's life

My purpose here is not to reconstruct Strindberg's post-Inferno belief system.⁴ A number of very able scholars have engaged with this at length.⁵ Rather it is to adumbrate some of the personal sources of the agonistic religiosity found in the later plays. However it is perhaps worth noting that Strindberg's conversion to Christianity had its parallels, as scholar Martin Lamm has pointed out, throughout European intellectual circles at the turn of the twentieth century.⁶ Strindberg's case is unusual, however, because he did not ultimately find a home in either a particular confession or any of the theosophical movements that then flourished. Strindberg's scepticism, evident enough in what follows, was combined with a distrust of systems of ideas, and this made it difficult for him ever to reach a settled view of the world, whether this view was of his own making or not. In his plays, at any rate, Strindberg cannot help being at least partially at war with his religion. Theatre may be, then, a particularly appropriate medium for expressing this sort of conflict. This conflict does not issue in a harmonious synthesis. In Martin Lamm's case, although he concedes that Strindberg's religious ideas never reached a final form, he nevertheless attempts to create a more or less coherent whole out of them. This coherence conflicts, as Lamm himself admits, with the way Strindberg addresses the question of divine justice in a number of plays.⁷ Indeed, Lamm's account of Strindberg's religious development leaves a vivid impression of a man strenuously seeking to find evidence of order in the cosmos, yet never convincing himself either of its presence or absence, still less

⁴ It will become clear, I think, in the course of this thesis that I think such an undertaking is inherently problematic. Strindberg's religion, although steeped in Lutheran Protestantism, was a collection of bits, assembled on an ad hoc basis to meet his immediate needs. Whether it ever really constituted a coherent system seems to me dubious.

⁵ See, for example, Martin Lamm, *Strindberg och Makterna*; Gunnar Brandell, *Strindbergs Infernokris*; Göran Stockenström, *Ismael i Öken*.

⁶ Martin Lamm, *Strindberg och Makterna* (Stockholm: Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelses Bokförlag, 1936), p. 13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

coming to rest in a settled view.⁸ This internal conflict finds expression in all the plays examined here. How, then, did this conflict arise? Addressing this question, even briefly, means engaging with the nature of the sources for Strindberg's life.

Strindberg provided a vast array of information for biographers. His letters alone run to twenty-two volumes, in addition to which he kept an "Occult Diary" (*Ockulta Dagboken*) for several years. He also wrote a number of what purport to be autobiographies. They have certainly been treated as such. Strindberg, however, always introduces an ironic distance between himself and his works. This is true also of his plays, which can seem deceptively autobiographical. *The Son of a Servant*, written in 1886, is the major source for his early life and illustrates this problem particularly clearly. Strindberg introduces it with a mock interview in which the *Interviewer* (a mouthpiece for conservative views) attempts to find out from the *Author* whether his new book is an autobiography, a novel or a memoir. The Author refuses to answer, saying only that it is "the story of the evolution of a human being from 1849 [the year of Strindberg's birth] to '67."⁹ He denies that it is a confession or a defence of himself, but calls it the "literature of the future."¹⁰ It aims to analyse why the protagonist developed as he did in terms of heredity and environmental factors. The book itself is written in the third person, reinforcing the rhetorical distance between the author and the protagonist. It contains a psychologically acute study of its main character, and reads at times like a novel, at times like a polemic. The narrator intrudes to attack moral codes, especially those relating to sexuality, to make comments on contemporary political developments, or to argue against the

⁸ See, in particular, Lamm, *Strindberg och Makterna*, pp. 135-50

⁹ August Strindberg, *The Son of a Servant: the Story of the Evolution of a Human Being, 1849-67*, trans. Evert Sprinchorn (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), p. 19

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24

child-rearing practices and educational system of his day. Clearly the whole thing is highly autobiographical, but is it autobiography? The *Author* in the introduction is right to resist calling it that.

With this in mind, *The Son of a Servant* nevertheless tells us a lot about Strindberg's early religious life. He was born in 1849 into an intermittently prosperous middle-class household, ruled over by Oscar Strindberg, his stern, emotionally distant father. Some have connected this, not implausibly, with Strindberg's later fixation on God as an angry, punitive but strong father figure that Strindberg alternately rebelled against and identified with.¹¹ Certainly he felt an early dissatisfaction with the weak Christ, wishing to confront God directly rather than through an intermediary.¹² His mother, who had been a servant in Oscar Strindberg's household before they married, died when Strindberg was thirteen. From her, Strindberg acquired his enduring sense of identification with the working classes, although this was complicated by a conflicting sense of identification with the aristocracy. Under his mother's influence, Strindberg inclined towards Pietism, which had gained wide popularity among the lower classes in mid-nineteenth century Sweden. As a result, Strindberg became ferociously religious. According to *The Son of a Servant*, he engaged in a competition with his stepmother, who also had Pietistic leanings, to become the most insufferably pure in the household. Strindberg developed a martyr-complex that remained with him for the rest of his life. *The Son of a Servant* recounts his pleasure in being overlooked

¹¹ Strindberg himself seems to suggest this connection in his essay "Mysticism -- For Now." The scholar Gunnar Brandell certainly interprets this essay as evidence that Strindberg derived his idea of God from his father, even positing a Strindbergian "Mother - religion" and "Father - religion." August Strindberg, *Selected Essays*, trans. Michael Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 56 - 63; Gunnar Brandell, *Strindberg in Inferno*, trans. B. Jacobs (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 3-4, 153 - 154.

¹² In the essay "Mysticism - For Now" Strindberg says that as a child "my thoughts about God embraced the notion of an infinitely strong man, from whom I had borrowed strength by way of prayer [...] I never prayed to the weak, tortured figure of Christ, not even then, when his image hung upon the altar. Presumably I considered him as helpless as myself [...]." Strindberg, *Selected Essays*, p. 60.

and taking the blame for others' wrongdoing; his young flesh was "nailed to the cross."¹³ He found a sense of exultation in his degradation. At the same time, he feared the seduction of worldly life, a fear that re-surfaced in his post-Inferno plays. He therefore longed for marriage, this being the only outlet for his sexual drive that was legitimised by church and state. He lived in a state of terror, convinced that because he had practised masturbation his body would rot away and he would die at the age of twenty-five. His life among the Pietists left a lasting impression. He later described them as "...those pale, wicked, terror-stricken creatures, who cannot smile and who look like maniacs."¹⁴ After a few years, having already strained relations with his family by berating them for their lack of religious seriousness and holding himself aloof, he came under the influence of Theodore Parker, an American Unitarian minister with a strong following in Sweden. Strindberg, in accordance with Unitarian principles, rejected the Trinity and the divinity of Christ, becoming a freethinker. He seems to have embraced this with a fervour equal to that of his former Pietism. According to Strindberg scholar Martin Lamm he "agitated in class, instigated a strike against morning prayers, quarrelled with the theology teacher and the headmaster."¹⁵ Both these phases, Pietistic and Unitarian, offer clues to Strindberg's post-Inferno 'confessionless Christianity.'¹⁶ The Pietists began as a radical Protestant movement in the late 17th century, and sought to emulate the earliest Christian communities. They believed in the complete spiritual renewal of the

¹³ Strindberg, *The Son of a Servant*, p. 146

¹⁴ August Strindberg, *Inferno / From an Occult Diary*, trans. Mary Sandbach (London: Penguin, 1979), p. 262

¹⁵ Martin Lamm, *August Strindberg* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1967), p. 17

¹⁶ "Confessionless Christianity" and "confessionless religion" are phrases Strindberg himself used to characterise his religious orientation, without ever defining what the term meant. In the prose work *Legender* (Legends), for example, he says "I cut my personality in half and show the world the naturalistic occultist, but inside maintain and nurse the sprouting germ of a confessionless religion." In *Ensam* (Alone), he says that the works of Balzac "had ... slipped into me a kind of religion which I would call confessionless Christianity." August Strindberg, *Samlade Skrifter*, vol. 28, John Landqvist (ed.) (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1914), p. 214; *Ibid.*, vol. 38, p. 147

individual, bringing him or her to a vivid sense of God's presence. This inner renewal was made evident in personal piety, that is, a manner of living "expressive of love for God and man."¹⁷ Pietistic Christianity thus had an existential orientation. Abstract theology was less important than personal piety. In addition, the Pietists held that their fellowship abrogated all bounds of religion, class and nationality. They addressed each other as "brother" and "sister." They had a sense of separation from society as a whole, which did not live by Pietistic values, and they had a mission to reform and improve the world. Thus, despite their sense of separation from society, they had a strong commitment to social engagement on behalf of the poor and the sick. Finally, Pietism inherited Luther's emphasis on a more or less literal interpretation of the Bible. The Bible formed the centre of their faith, and their church services emphasised sermons at the expense of ritual.¹⁸ Now Strindberg, in the end, emphatically rejected Pietism. In a letter to Torsten Hedlund, for instance, he inveighs against them, complaining of their selfish egotism and the falseness of their proclaimed love of humanity.¹⁹ Nevertheless, some aspects of Pietism seem to have remained with Strindberg. These are, firstly, that religion remained for him an existential question, not one of an abstract truth. This was as true of his atheist period as of his periods as an avowed Christian. Secondly, the Pietists' social engagement on behalf of the poor also remained with Strindberg, despite his occasional fantasies of becoming a Nietzschean superman. Indeed, late in life Strindberg equated Christianity with socialism.²⁰ This found expression in his later plays in a sense of outraged compassion, often directed against a Creator of dubious justness. Thirdly,

¹⁷ F. Ernest Stoeffler, "Pietism," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 11, Mircea Eliade (ed.), p. 324

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 324 - 326

¹⁹ August Strindberg, *Brev*, vol. 10, Torsten Eklund (ed.), (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1968), p. 205

²⁰ Olof Lagerkrantz, *August Strindberg*, trans. Anselm Hollo (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), p. 365

his works, and especially his late plays, interrogate the Bible even as they prolifically reproduce Biblical motifs.

From Theodore Parker's Unitarianism, on the other hand, Strindberg gained a renewed vigour and enjoyment of life. According to *The Son of a Servant*, a beefsteak and two bottles of beer with an aristocratic friend finally caused his devout Christianity to tumble, and he turned to Parker's optimistic theism. Parker, and the Unitarians generally, rejected the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus, and original sin. Strindberg's former asceticism crumbled, at least for a time. Subsequently, it seemed to Strindberg that he had two selves: "[h]is new self revolted against his old one, and for the rest of his life they fought with each other like an unhappy married couple who cannot get a divorce."²¹ This internal conflict helped shape the religious outlook of his later plays.

Strindberg may have abandoned Pietism early on, but he remained a theist until his trial for blasphemy. In 1884 he caused a scandal with his short story collection *Giftas* ("Married") in which he refers to holy communion as "the impudent deception practised with Högstedt's Piccadon at 65 öre the half gallon, and Lettström's wafers at 1 crown a pound, which the parson passed off as the body and blood of Jesus of Nazareth, the agitator who had been executed over 1800 years earlier."²² While this passage satirises Church ritual, it implicitly expresses admiration of Jesus. The trial was a public sensation, but although Strindberg was acquitted life in Sweden became unbearable to him and he left for the first of a number of periods of exile in Europe. He became an avowed atheist and naturalist, producing a number of violent and very

²¹ Strindberg, *The Son of a Servant*, p. 154

²² August Strindberg, *Getting Married, parts I and II*, trans. Mary Sandbach (London: Gollancz, 1972), p. 71

powerful dramas in which he depicts life as a deadly struggle for survival. He himself conceived of these as part of a drama "which is not concerned whether something is beautiful or ugly, as long as it is great."²³ The most famous of these were *The Father* and *Miss Julie*. Strindberg's atheism was notably practical. God's existence was for him a personal and ethical question rather than one of an abstract truth. Indeed, Strindberg's atheism was an existential choice. We get the flavour of his atheism in this statement from his *Inferno*: "The fact is, that in the course of years, as I came to notice that the unseen Powers left the world to its fate and showed no interest in it, I had become an atheist."²⁴ As one scholar puts it, Strindberg's atheism "was the result of a practical decision to take his fate into his own hands, instead of depending on the intervention of divine Providence."²⁵ Thus in the Foreword to *Miss Julie* Strindberg berates believers not for intellectual but for moral weakness: they cannot bear their own guilt, but must put the burden onto Jesus.²⁶ This comment reveals the extent to which Strindberg retained, even as an atheist, the emotional outlook of his Pictistic years. It is also true that he retained a sharp sense of God's injustice even after his conversion back to Christianity, a point we will return to in the course of the thesis.

Strindberg's re-conversion to Christianity took place after a crisis, or in fact a repeated series of crises between 1894 and 1896. Strindberg himself gave a fictionalised account of this period in his book *Inferno*, because of which it has come to be known as his "Inferno crisis." Since Martin Lamm's monumental work on Strindberg, it has been a convention of Strindberg scholarship to divide his life and

²³ Strindberg, *Selected Essays*, p. 78

²⁴ Strindberg, *Inferno*, p. 102

²⁵ Gunnar Brandell, *Strindberg in Inferno*, trans. B. Jacobs (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), p. 54

²⁶ August Strindberg, *Miss Julie and Other Plays*, trans. Michael Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 63

work around this point.²⁷ Each of the crises followed the same pattern: general anxiety and feeling sick; fantasies of suicide and persecution; flight to new surroundings, followed by the subsiding of the crisis.²⁸ This conveys nothing of the vivid sense of paranoid terror in some passages of *Inferno*, or the hallucinatory force of others. As with *The Son of a Servant*, this is not quite autobiography. The narrator is very close to Strindberg, and the events he narrates follow closely those that Strindberg experienced in Paris and, later, in Austria. Yet this is still not straight autobiography, but somewhere between autobiography, allegory and novel. It deals with the narrator's abnegation and chastisement by 'the Powers', who eventually whip him somewhat unwillingly back into the Christian fold. At times these Powers seem to be actual spiritual beings external to the narrator, at times they appear to be psychological projections embodying aspects of the narrator's own psyche. A thought which first occurs in *The Son of a Servant* recurs here, that this world is a penal colony where we suffer for unremembered crimes in a previous existence. But here the narrator (as did Strindberg himself) experiences life as an actual hell. It was towards the end of his *Inferno*-crisis that Strindberg first encountered the writings of the eighteenth century Swedish mystic, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688 – 1772). Strindberg was immensely impressed by Swedenborg's writings. Of his first reading of Swedenborg's descriptions of hell, Strindberg says "I recognized in it the landscape around Klam [the Austrian village he was staying in] ... drawn as if from nature."²⁹ Swedenborg shared with Strindberg a marked tendency to read significance into

²⁷ This division, implying as it does a decisive break between the pre- and post- *Inferno* Strindberg, is far from universally accepted. Any lengthy engagement with Strindberg reveals many continuities between these phases of his work, and the seeds of many later developments can be discerned in his earlier writings. Nevertheless, Strindberg's drama did change, and change radically, after his *Inferno* crisis.

²⁸ Gunnar Brandell gives an exhaustive description of the precise times, places and characteristics of each crisis in *Strindberg in Inferno*.

²⁹ Strindberg, *Inferno*, p. 211

apparently commonplace incidents and coincidences.³⁰ Swedenborg, again like Strindberg, felt his life to be directed by spiritual beings, and it is Swedenborg's writings that brought Strindberg to view these Powers as disciplinary spirits guided by a beneficent Providence.³¹ This, in part, helped Strindberg make sense of his experiences and particularly of his suffering, as did the belief in reincarnation that he adopted at about this time. A similar motivation prompted him to adopt a belief in karma, a doctrine popularized in the west by HP Blavatsky.³² It is significant, however, that although Strindberg responded so strongly to Swedenborg's visionary work, the latter's theology repelled him.³³ It is also characteristic that Strindberg could not give himself wholly to a Swedenborgian view of the cosmos. He could not help questioning the presence of a providential design or its ultimate beneficence. Indeed, both theodicy and the idea of a moral order in the cosmos come into question, at times subjected to outright attack, in the plays discussed in this thesis. Similarly, in his *Inferno*, Strindberg at times takes this worldly hell as just chastisement, at others as the work of a morally dubious divinity:

It is the Earth itself that is Hell, the prison constructed for us by an intelligence superior to our own, in which I could not take a step without injuring the happiness of others, and in which my fellow creatures could not enjoy their own happiness without causing me pain.³⁴

This passage contains an accusation against the architect of the earthly prison.

Strindberg's naturalistic plays had presented the world as a ruthless struggle, in which

³⁰ Lamm, *Strindberg och Makterna*, p. 130-1

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 104

³² Although Strindberg claimed already to have derived a similar idea from the works of Swedish naturalist Carl von Linné. See *ibid.*, p. 134. Strindberg detested Blavatsky and claimed to find nothing original in her writings, yet she did exercise a certain influence on him. This becomes evident in the Chamber Plays, in particular in the subtitle of *The Ghost Sonata: Kama Loka*.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 111-12

³⁴ Strindberg, *Inferno*, p. 211

survival meant destroying others. That view is still evident here, but now it causes pain and resentment against the re-discovered Creator. The narrator struggles to believe, yet every time he comes close to something like a conventional Christian outlook, his words sound forced and trite, even sentimental. We can observe this in the contrast of two passages, both from the final chapters of *Inferno*:

...the undeniable manifestations of the Evil One, in his traditional form, are simply scarecrows, conjured up by a Providence, unique and good, who governs by means of an immense staff of servants made up of the departed.³⁵

From the next chapter:

Is religion a punishment, and is Christ the spirit of vengeance? [...] Is it possible – God forgive me – that even Christ has been transformed into a demon? He has brought death to reason, to the flesh, to beauty, to joy, to the purest feelings of affection of which mankind is capable.³⁶

The book, although purporting to be the story of a man's conversion, ends in confusion. In the Epilogue the narrator tells us that he had intended to end his book with the words "what a jest, what a miserable jest, this life is after all."³⁷ The narrator is acutely aware of his own irresolution, declaring in a passage that is part prayer to the Powers, part castigation "In my youth I was a true believer and you made of me a free thinker. Of the free-thinker you made an atheist, of the atheist a monk [...] You have cut the ground from under all my enthusiasms, and suppose that I now dedicate myself to religion, I know for a certainty that before ten years have passed you will prove to me that religion is false."³⁸ In this peculiar passage, the narrator does not declare that religion is false. He declares that eventually it will

³⁵ Ibid., p. 259

³⁶ Ibid., p. 262

³⁷ Ibid., p. 272

³⁸ Ibid., p. 262

prove to be so, although he believes it now and seriously wishes to pursue it. The narrator, and, we can infer, Strindberg, are neither believers nor disbelievers. This, rather than simple theistic belief, characterises the religious position behind the plays explored here: simultaneous belief and doubt, an agonising no-man's-land. *Inferno* does not recount the conversion of a sinner, but the birth of a half-believer.

The historical background: the half-believer and the Bible as narrative

To be a Christian has always, perhaps, been problematic. The Gospel of Mark contains the declaration "I believe; help thou mine unbelief."³⁹ However, the problematic status of being Christian became particularly acute in the nineteenth century, and for many remains so today. Indeed Christianity is often most problematic for the believer. The apparent withdrawal of God from the world threatened to make life a meaningless and nihilistic struggle. In Matthew Arnold's words,

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full ...

But now I only hear

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar, ...

And we are here as on a darkling plain

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,

Where ignorant armies clash by night.

³⁹ Mark 9: 24

Nietzsche characterised the situation in more extreme terms: God had not withdrawn, God was dead – and we had killed him.⁴⁰ The result was disorientation and a pervading sense of loss. The theological responses to this have included the birth of American fundamentalism in the early twentieth century, as well as, more recently, the UK movement known as Radical Orthodoxy. Another response has been that of the half-believer, which we will explore in a moment. These responses all took place within Christianity. There was in the late nineteenth century another kind of reaction, one that is still with us: the turn towards Asian religions. The eclectic and syncretic spirit this engendered was exemplified early on by Madam Blavatsky (1831-1891), who first came to prominence in the 1870s. She claimed to represent a lodge of masters whose members included the Buddha and Jesus. Implicit in this is the claim that all religions are in essence one, whatever the differences of doctrine and ritual. Swedenborg had a century earlier adopted a position not far from this. Another symptom of this turn towards the east was the World Parliament of Religions, an event that took place in Chicago in 1893 and exposed the western world for the first time to figures like DT Suzuki and Swami Vivekananda. All these responses, disparate as they are, correspond to aspects of Strindberg's reaction to his own religious crisis.

Of the above responses to the crisis of Christianity, one of the most pertinent to Strindberg is the figure of the half-believer. The situation of the half-believer is the starting point for a number of more or less postmodern responses to theology that interweave with Strindberg's complex reaction to Christianity. The half-believer does not connote half-hearted belief or indifference. Half-belief is discomfiting precisely

⁴⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Josephine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 119 - 120

because it occurs in the devout. The half-believer "finds himself more often than not inhabiting a strange, bewildering and uncomfortable no-man's land between belief and unbelief."⁴¹ The half-believer is a modern figure, and the responses to the half-believer's situation numerous. Richard Holloway, the former Bishop of Edinburgh, writes somewhat uncomfortably from a position of half-belief. He opens one book with an attack on doctrinally formulated religion, opposing to it an instinctive "religious impulse" that remains outside the proprietary claims of any particular tradition or denomination.⁴² The theologian Don Cupitt, on the other hand, embraces a Christian atheism that replaces the "realistic and anthropomorphic" view of God with an internalised religion. Furthermore he defends his position as orthodox.⁴³ The a/theology of Mark C. Taylor begins in a place without fixed landmarks, asking the question "But where *are* we?"⁴⁴ He goes on, "Individuals appear to be unsure of where they have come from and where they are going ... Furthermore, the 'texts' that have guided and grounded previous generations often appear illegible in the modern and postmodern worlds." He traces the postmodern predicament to one of the great "prophets" of postmodernism, Nietzsche. Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God anticipates the predicament addressed by all these writers when he asks

Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to? Away from all suns? ... Is there still an up and a down? Aren't we straying as though through an infinite nothing?⁴⁵

⁴¹ Peter Baelz, *The Forgotten Dream: Experience, Hope and God* (London: Mowbrays, 1975), p. 2

⁴² Richard Holloway, *Doubts and Loves: What is Left of Christianity*, (Edinburgh: Cannongate, 2002), pp. 3-5

⁴³ Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God* (London: SCM Press, 1980), p. 93

⁴⁴ Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 3

⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 120

This is the territory of half-belief. The plays we will be exploring also inhabit this space.

I have already hinted that the predicament faced by a believer at the turn of the twentieth century, particularly one as acutely aware of the intellectual currents of his age as Strindberg, was related to the progressive collapse of the perceived coherence of the Biblical canon. This was a particularly acute problem for the Lutheran inheritance of the north with its emphasis on the Bible as the sole source of authority. Mark C Taylor, in formulating his a/theology, points out the problems facing the believer rather succinctly. In his *Erring*, Taylor points out that theology has for centuries been underwritten by a network comprising four basic terms: God, self, history and the book.⁴⁶ The self reflects the unity and coherence of God, while history has a fixed beginning and an end, in the sense of a purpose or telos. The Book weaves the story of the interaction of the self with God. The four terms of this network were bound together to produce a complete, coherent narrative. Strindberg, writing almost a century before Taylor, was already quite consciously undermining the self and the book. The paradox is that this dissolution is simultaneously a moment of intensely religious vision. Indeed, it is frequently a moment of apocalyptic vision.

The dissolution of narrative coherence has a history in the attempts after Luther and Calvin to find a hermeneutic that could provide a stable and authoritative reading of the Bible. As Hans Frei points out in his classic *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, before the eighteenth century, the books of the Old and New Testaments were

⁴⁶ Mark C. Taylor, *Erring*, p. 7 and passim.

assumed both to be literally true, and to form a seamless whole.⁴⁷ While for Luther “the grammatical or historical sense is the true sense,”⁴⁸ he had to supplement this with a figural or typological reading. This was made necessary by two linked concerns: the unity of the canon; and the centrality of Christ to both Old and New Testaments.⁴⁹ To make this work, the events and people of the Old Testament were taken to have both a literal and a typological reference: as well as referring to historical events, they pre-figure the New Testament. Thus the Promised Land has a double reference: it both fulfils the promise made by God to the Israelites, and prefigures the Kingdom of Heaven promised to humanity in general. This interpretative operation linked the disparate books of the canon together, and turned it into a single narrative: the two testaments became “one canon, the unitary subject of which was the story of man’s fall and the salvation wrought by Jesus Christ.”⁵⁰ Thus the Bible tells a single story that begins with the creation of the world in Genesis and ends, in Revelation, with the end of days, and all of human history is contained within this history of salvation.

Confidence in this grand narrative began to break down as a logical and reflective gap opened up between the Bible and the world. The unity of the literal and figural readings of the Bible came to seem untenable as the assumptions underpinning this unity came under attack. Under pressure, “the literal and figural reading draw apart, the latter gradually looking like a forced, arbitrary imposition of unity on a group of very diverse texts. No longer an extension of literal reading, figural interpretation instead becomes a bad historical argument or an arbitrary allegorizing of texts in the

⁴⁷ Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974) pp. 1-2, 4-5

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31

service of preconceived dogma."⁵¹ The unity of the Bible thus became questionable, and human history could not easily be read into the Biblical narrative. Indeed, in the eighteenth century it became important to test the Bible against a reconstruction of history, and this also led to demands to subject the Bible to historical assumptions: "then, historical judgment had been no more than a function of the literal ... sense of a narrative passage; now, on the contrary, the sense of such a passage came to depend on the estimate of its historical claims, character, and origin."⁵² In other words the interpretative position had reversed, and typology as a means of unifying the canon came under strain. Thus canonical unity became an issue for the faithful.

For Christianity after Paul, the primary narrative is the Passion. The betrayal, condemnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus still grips the western imagination. It has also become the core of Christian claims to universality. Humanity fell with Adam, and Christ, alone innocent, paid the price for the original transgression with his torment and death. The resurrection reveals this narrative as comedy, in Dante's sense, rather than tragedy. The resurrection gives the crucifixion significance. Without it, the Gospels would tell a story of meaningless suffering and death. As it is, this is a narrative of salvation. Humanity has fallen, the world is at fault, but the resurrection promises to restore humanity. This redemptive narrative involves a reading of history (history is caught up in the divine drama of fall and redemption), as well as an understanding of humanity in general (humanity is fallen, and human imperfection becomes almost characteristic), and an understanding of human identity (as distinct coherent personality). In other words, a redemptive narrative rests on narrative conventions, of coherent individual actors within a linear

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 37

⁵² Ibid., p. 41

history where cause and effect usually work in an unremarkable way (apart from divine interventions or miracles). This set of assumptions has a parallel in Aristotle's analysis of tragedy. A brief review of the Aristotelian model of theatre helps to highlight both the originality and the theological import of the kind of theatre Strindberg embarked on in his dream plays.

For Aristotle, the essence of tragedy lies in mimesis, "an imitation of a worthy or illustrious, and perfect action."⁵³ Theatre, and indeed art in general, is an imitation of the world. Whilst Aristotle discerns six major aspects of tragedy, he lays the greatest importance on plot, defined as "the combination of incidents. For tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of actions..."⁵⁴ All the actions and incidents of the plot must, further, form a coherent whole. As a whole, it should possess a beginning, a middle and an end.⁵⁵ Thus the plot consists of essentially one action with a number of parts: "the fable should be the imitation of one action ... the parts of the transaction should be so arranged, that any one of them being transposed, or taken away, the whole would become different or changed."⁵⁶ A causal chain therefore links the first and last actions of the plot, encompassing everything between.

There are two points to make here, the first connected with theology, the second with Strindberg. Firstly, then, Christian theology has tended to read history in terms not dissimilar to an Aristotelian drama. It has a beginning and a middle, and involves a projected end to history. This resemblance is probably no coincidence, given Aristotle's influence on scholastic theology. The latter shares Aristotle's concern for

⁵³ Aristotle, *The Rhetoric, Poetic and Nichomachean Ethics of Aristotle*, trans. Thomas Taylor (Frome: The Prometheus Trust, 2002), p. 196

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 197

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 199

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 200

coherent totalities, aiming to make theology into an internally consistent edifice of ideas, a "cathedral of the mind."⁵⁷ Aristotelian drama may therefore be said to carry within it assumptions consonant with theology conceived of as the attempt to create a coherent, consistent and all-encompassing system of doctrines. Secondly, in his naturalistic phase Strindberg was writing largely in accordance with Aristotelian assumptions. Although Strindberg denied character as a coherent entity, the naturalistic plays have a beginning and an end linked by a causal chain that makes them into coherent wholes. Although they express a view of the world that is ostensibly atheistic, they are in this sense more theologically conservative than the post-Inferno dramas. In contrast, Strindberg's dream plays break decisively with Aristotelian drama. As Strindberg puts it in the foreword to *A Dream Play*, "time and space do not exist."⁵⁸ It is significant, then, that Strindberg begins to make use of Platonic ideas in his dream plays. Not only does he employ Platonic imagery in both the dialogue and the mise-en-scene, but the deliberate breaking up of theatrical realism is also arguably a move towards Plato. Strindberg's move away from Aristotelian theatre is also, to some extent, a move towards a Platonic theatre. We will explore this further in Chapter 3, but briefly stated in a Platonic theatre Plato's myth of the cave becomes the central theatrical metaphor. Rather than a theatre in which the audience become passive observers of an imitation of the world, a Platonic theatre aims to 'turn' the audience away from the world of becoming, and towards being.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ The phrase is Etienne Gilson's. Quoted Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, Fourth Edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p. 29

⁵⁸ August Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel* (Stockholm: Legenda, 1986), p. 108

⁵⁹ See Anthony Gash, "Plato's Theatre of the Mind," in Anthony Frost (ed.), *Theatre Theories: From Plato to Virtual Reality* (Nowrich: The Drama Studio, 2000), pp. 1-22

Another facet of the background to Strindberg's Christianity, and a vitally important one, is the early impression made on him by the Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard (1813 – 1855). Kierkegaard, like Strindberg, objected to all-encompassing metaphysical systems. Kierkegaard's Christianity is in a sense anti-narrative, too, in that faith involves a leap, a definitive break with non-faith. Kierkegaard presents us with an existential choice. Strindberg felt the attraction and the force of Kierkegaard's thinking, but despite this was never quite able to make the Kierkegaardian leap. Its demand both appealed to and appalled him. Strindberg's contact with Kierkegaard was to a significant extent mediated by Ibsen's play *Brand*. *Master Olof*, Strindberg's first great play, reveals his reaction to Kierkegaard and to the Kierkegaardian hero of Ibsen's play. These responses resonate throughout Strindberg's later work.

Kierkegaard, Brand, and Master Olof

Strindberg's earliest exposure to Kierkegaardian thought seems to have come in the form of a play, Ibsen's *Brand*. A little later, while still a student, Strindberg read Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*.⁶⁰ Strindberg instinctively felt Kierkegaard's importance, although he had difficulty understanding him.⁶¹ The exact relationship of Ibsen's *Brand* and Kierkegaardian ideas is vexed, but there are striking resemblances, and in the late 1860s this seemed sufficiently obvious for the Danish critic Georg Brandes to describe Ibsen as Kierkegaard's poet.⁶² Strindberg was immensely impressed with

⁶⁰ Bjarnasson's unpublished PhD thesis on *Categories of Kierkegaardian Thought in the Life and Writings of August Strindberg* carefully details Strindberg's encounter with Kierkegaard.

⁶¹ *Brev* vol. 1, pp. 103, 122.

⁶² Habib C. Malik, *Receiving Søren Kierkegaard: the Early Impact and Transmission of his Thought* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997), p. 148. Brandes changed his mind about this some years later, partly due to Ibsen's own denials. Malik discusses in detail the difficulties

Brand, and Strindberg's first major play, *Master Olof*, reads, it seems to me, as a response to it. (Indeed, the last play Strindberg wrote, *The Great Highway*, also bears some striking resemblances to *Brand*.) As the Kierkegaardian themes of *Brand* and Strindberg's response to them have echoes throughout the plays we will be looking at, I want to examine here the pertinent themes in *Brand* and then at the way in which *Master Olof* responds to them.

Brand dramatises a number of Kierkegaardian themes: an either/or choice; the leap; and sacrifice (teleological suspension of the ethical). The play also echoes the Kierkegaardian concern for truth as existential and subjective: the truth seen from the viewpoint of a particular existing individual. The categorical choice required by either/or is fundamental to *Brand*, but in Kierkegaard's writings there are two ways of understanding it. The book *Either/Or* concerns the choice between the aesthetic and the ethical.⁶³ Very briefly, the aesthetic is characterised by a disengaged enjoyment. It is an intellectually sophisticated hedonism that entails, ultimately, a detachment from others and from any serious commitment. Any commitment entered into in the aesthetic mode is done as an experiment, with the ultimate aim of further cultivating pleasure. The aesthetic is attractive, but shallow. The ethical, on the other hand, involves not merely an acknowledgement of the claim the ethical makes on the individual, but a kind of inward commitment. The ethical is, paradoxical as it may seem, focused inwardly and it is highly individualistic. *Either/Or* presents no systematic argument in favour of one over the other, but rather they are presented side by side and the reader is effectively asked to choose. Of course, this is a little disingenuous: Kierkegaard quite clearly holds the ethical to be superior to the

in determining the nature and extent of Kierkegaard's influence on Ibsen, without coming to a firm conclusion.

⁶³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 2004).

aesthetic. But in any case, the two are incompatible. One must ultimately choose between the ethical and the aesthetic, even if the aesthetic is in some ways subsumed in the ethical. The choice is absolute, but what distinguishes the two, ultimately, is the quality of the choice. As we saw, the aesthetic individual can choose to abide by ethical norms as an experiment, but does not finally commit him- or herself. The ethical in this sense seems to consist more in the act of commitment than in the thing committed to. The second kind of either/or bears a strong resemblance to the first, but here the choice is between the ethical and the religious. In *Fear and Trembling's* account of Abraham and Isaac, the religious involves a suspension of the ethical. By any ethical standard, to sacrifice one's son is abominable. For Kierkegaard, though, Abraham achieves something greater than the ethical. In fact, such is the force of God's demand that it suspends the ethical. This is of some importance to *Brand*, but what concerns us here is really the way Kierkegaard characterises Christianity. For Kierkegaard, Christianity is also a matter of existential choice. It is not a cognitive truth about the universe, like Newton's law of gravity, which can be empirically demonstrated and commands a sort of cold assent. Those who attempt to make Christianity conform to reason have misunderstood Christianity. In fact, as characterised in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, we can have no objective assurance of the truth of Christianity.⁶⁴ To suppose we can, or to suppose it is a matter of rational argument and evidence, is to mistake Christianity for an objective, cognitive truth. Faith consists precisely in a total commitment to something of which we can have no objective assurance. Christianity here presents us with an absolute choice: we believe or we do not. But here again it consists, not so much in what is believed, but in how you believe it. It is, even more so than the ethical, characterised

⁶⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, "Concluding Unscientific Postscript", in Mark C. Taylor, *Deconstruction in Context*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 169 - 190

by inwardness. Christianity for Kierkegaard concerns the individual. Now there is another aspect to all this that will become important for looking at Strindberg, namely the sense in which the choice secures individual identity. In *Either/Or*, the judge characterises the ethical as something that allows you to achieve individuality. It imbues a character and a life with coherence.⁶⁵ The aesthetically lived life, by contrast, is always prone to change according to circumstance and lacks the kind of stability available to the ethically oriented. As if to demonstrate this, the material making up the first, aesthetic, section of the book consist of fragments.

The Christianity of *Brand's* eponymous hero appears Kierkegaardian in its inwardness. It does not consist of conformity to a (worldly) church. Indeed, the demands of Brand's inward Christianity bring him into sharp conflict with the Church, as well as secular society. In Brand's view, secular society and the Church are, in any case, more or less indistinguishable. The Church, for Brand, has compromised with the world. The individual, then, must choose between the world and Christianity. Indeed, Brand finds he must choose between the Church and Christianity. This choice is absolute, and in this sense it resembles Kierkegaard's either/or. In Brand's terms, it is "all or nothing." Compromise is impossible. Brand's 'all or nothing' is cruder than Kierkegaard's either/or, but in both cases they proclaim an existential predicament: that the individual must choose. Furthermore, in the matter of Christianity, the choice is absolute. It is also, in both cases, essentially individual and existential. The consequence, for Brand, is a life lived in opposition. Brand is heroically individualistic, and his absolute commitment puts him at war with everyone. His faith demands that he always swims against the current. Indeed, this

⁶⁵ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, pp. 478-80, 472

swimming against the current itself seems to constitute his Christianity. In this way too, he resembles Kierkegaard, for whom *how* one believes matters more than *what* one believes.⁶⁶ Here too Brand connects with the hero of Strindberg's *Master Olof*, whose brother Lars tells him "You were born to fight."⁶⁷ Brand's absolute commitment generates all the dramatic conflict in the play, and everything happens as a result of this.

Another aspect of Kierkegaard's characterisation of Christianity, and one that feature prominently in *Brand*, is risk. The Christian has an absolute inner commitment to something without any (objective) assurance that it is true, as we have seen. This is a risky undertaking. As Kierkegaard says in *Postscript*: "...I must constantly be intent upon holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water, still preserving my faith ...".⁶⁸ This is almost literally true of Brand in Act 2. He crosses the fjord in a perilous storm to tend a dying man who will otherwise die unshriven. Brand feels the religious demand in such a way that he must risk all. This sort of symbolism, of faith being bound up with ultimate risk, is also present in the first act. Brand is half-way up a mountain, accompanied by a peasant and a boy. A thick mist surrounds them, they have lost the path, and it is almost dark. The Peasant complains that they must turn back, they are in peril and Brand is walking on a thin crust of snow above a crevasse: "we are standing over a gulf, no one knows how deep: it'll swallow us up, and you too!"⁶⁹ Brand proclaims that he is doing God's bidding, and his commitment is absolute: he must risk all. This resembles Beckett's vision of the human predicament, as well as

⁶⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, "Concluding Unscientific Postscript," p. 176

⁶⁷ Strindberg, "Master Olof", in Strindberg, *Plays: Three*, trans. Michael Meyer (London: Methuen, 2000), p. 18

⁶⁸ Kierkegaard, "Concluding Unscientific Postscript," p. 177

⁶⁹ Henrik Ibsen, *Brand: a Dramatic Poem*, trans. William Wilson (London: Methuen, 1891), p. 2

that of the Strindberg plays we will be looking at. Brand and his companions are lost in a fog on a pathless mountainside, suspended over a crevasse, but Brand goes on, according to the demands of his faith, walking a perilous path over an abyss.

Christianity is then a gamble. As the Baillie says in Act 3:

The Baillie: [...] you stand where the road divides. Don't stake your all on one card.

Brand: That I *shall* do.⁷⁰

Brand ruthlessly applies the absolute demand of his 'all or nothing.' He refuses to see his dying mother until she commits herself entirely to God, to do which she must sacrifice the last scrap of the wealth she has hoarded over a lifetime. From Brand's point of view she has made an idol of wealth and to turn away from this idolatry she must give up every last part of it: "the least fragment of the golden calf is fully as much an idol as the whole,"⁷¹ he proclaims. She finally dies without seeing her son, as Brand will not compromise, despite the anguish it costs him. The point of this is not that Brand is callous – he is evidently very distressed – but that his calling demands total commitment. Salvation is for Brand a matter of willingly sacrificing all: "dying in anguish upon the tree of the cross is not martyrdom; but *this, first:*

Willing the death of the cross [...] this, in the first place, is taking hold of salvation."⁷²

This extends ultimately to sacrificing his son and then his wife. He can only save his son by moving away from the unhealthy fjord he inhabits, but doing so means abandoning his calling. His wife, too, dies, probably from grief. The reference to Abraham sacrificing Isaac is obvious, except that here God does not intervene and stay Brand's hand. The ethical problem posed in the case of Abraham and Isaac is the

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 123

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 106

⁷² Ibid., p. 102

same one posed by Brand – namely that to sacrifice a child is monstrous. For Kierkegaard, this is justified by the suspension of the ethical. Such is the force of God's command that the ethical is momentarily suspended. Now, according to Malik, Brand never attains the religious, in Kierkegaard's sense, but remains in the ethical. He does not follow God's commands but the dictates of his own will. The problem is, it seems to me, that it is impossible to know. Brand follows with utter conviction what he conceives to be an absolute demand and sacrifices everything to it. He has no more assurance of his rightness at the end of the play than he has at the beginning. Indeed, the play's ending is ambiguous. Brand is buried in an avalanche that also engulfs the entire valley. This could be read as a flat contradiction of everything he believes – that there is only a brute material world that finally smothers all in an undifferentiated expanse of whiteness. We could also read an implicit critique of Kierkegaard in the play as a whole. Brand is impressive, but ambiguous. At times he resembles the monstrous bishop in Ingmar Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander*. He says, for example, "I know God's love, and that is not weak and mild [...] it offers caresses which leave wounds."⁷³ He later continues in the same style: "[y]ou manikin souls! you will end by turning Humanity into humanitarians! Was God humane to Jesus Christ?"⁷⁴ His faith by sheer act of will makes him impressive, if not also a fanatic. Whether his refusal to compromise is in the end a virtue, the play leaves open.

The name Brand, in both Norwegian and English, connotes fire and passion. Master Olof, the eponymous protagonist of Strindberg's first major play, also burns with a passionate faith:

⁷³ Ibid., p. 96

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 127

Olof: Once I had the flame of faith and it burned gloriously. But the monks quenched it with their holy water [...]

Lars: That was a fire of straw which would soon have burned out. But now the Lord will kindle in you a greater fire, which will consume the seed of the Philistines.⁷⁵

The play is loosely based on a historical character, the Swedish counterpart to Luther whom King Gustav Vasa made use of to break Sweden away from Roman Catholicism. The play depicts Sweden as suffering a Babylonian captivity under the rule of a corrupt Church and repressive state. Olof finds himself, reluctantly at first, whipped up to rebellion against the Church, first by his brother Lars, and later by Gert Bookbinder, a radical ex-priest. So, like Brand, Olof finds himself fighting the religious establishment. Brand embarks on a project to pull down the old village church and build a new one, in order to awaken the village and start the renewal of the country. Similarly, Lars urges Olof to "pull down the old, rotten house [...] The Lord will build a new one."⁷⁶ This makes Olof politically useful to the King, who is attempting to limit the power of the Church, but ultimately it brings Olof into conflict with the state.

In the cases of both Brand and Olof, choosing Christianity means strife. In both cases, their Christian calling leads them to fight for their countrymen's awakening from spiritual slumber. But where Brand is unbending to the end, Olof shows signs of human frailty. Even in the first act, he is at first very reluctant to fight the establishment. In a vision he sees an angel presenting him with a cup, but does not wish to take it. He wishes at best to follow in the rear of the fighting and heal the

⁷⁵ Strindberg, *Master Olof*, p. 17

⁷⁶ Ibid.

wounded. Perhaps more significantly, the play contains a curious parallel to Brand's argument with his mother. Where Brand's mother, despite conventional piety, is ultimately very worldly, Olof's mother remains a devout Catholic and deplores Olof's campaign against the Church. Brand, we have seen, ultimately refuses to attend his mother's death-bed because she will not give up her attachment to worldly wealth. Olof, on the other hand, attends his mother's death-bed, although she dies cursing him for ejecting the priest who was to perform the last rites. In his grief, Olof does what Brand never would – he compromises his principles, lights the candles left by the priest and puts palm branches in each of her hands. Here, the absolute either/or demand of faith meets the contrary demands of compassion and mercy. Olof finds he has to compromise with the world, although he condemns his own weakness. The demands of an absolute dedication to truth (as Olof conceives it) conflict with being human.

This choice between principle and compromise confronts Olof in the starkest possible form at the play's conclusion. He has become involved in a plot against the king. The king, however, offers a pardon if Olof recants and accepts an official position in the reformed Swedish Church. Olof finally must choose between martyrdom and compromise. The choice could not be starker. Olof compromises. In the last line of the play, Gert, offstage, condemns Olof with the single word 'apostate!' The play ends with Olof weeping in torment.

Now there are various ways in which *Master Olof* suggests an engagement with Kierkegaard. There is the suggestion in Act I of a progression from the aesthetic to the ethical: as the first scene opens, Olof is directing the rehearsal of a play he has

written. He appears, therefore, to be living aesthetically. Adding to this impression, he is at first reluctant to rebel, preferring to remain on the sidelines and observe, although he quickly overcomes this. His entry into the ethical and/or religious commits him to conflict with Church and then state authority in the name of his truth. There is also a suggestion that truth is subjective, dependent on the manner of belief rather than the substance. Olof tells his mother "What you believe has become a lie [...]. When you were young, you were right, when I am old I may be wrong."⁷⁷ In the 1870s and 80s, Strindberg was very self-consciously modern, and of course this way of thinking celebrates the young revolutionaries over the old reactionaries, although Strindberg was always hampered by being able to see the other side of the argument, a crucial factor in the conclusion of *Master Olof*. But above all, the truth for Strindberg, as for Kierkegaard, is existential not abstract. The play dramatises the confrontation of religious demands with the demands of living in the world. By Brand's standard, Olof fails. Yet Olof, because he finally gives way, is more human. He is both greater and lesser than Brand. The conflict between the demands of faith and the demands of the world re-appear in various forms in all the later plays we will be looking at, and Olof's response to the conflict also becomes characteristic.

Schopenhauer and Nietzsche

In an entry in his *Ockulta Dagboken* (Occult Diary), Strindberg writes "[t]he whole world is but a semblance (=Humbug or relative emptiness)."⁷⁸ This is not just the outburst of a disgruntled old man, but reflects a disposition already present in Strindberg's satirical early novel *The Red Room*, only here Strindberg's social satire

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 49

⁷⁸ Strindberg, "From an Occult Diary," in *Inferno / From an Occult Diary*, trans. Mary Sandbach (London: Penguin, 1979), p. 319

has undergone a kind of metaphysical inflation. In *The Red Room* characters wear masks and play roles to hide their real motives. In the statement above, the whole world has come to seem a mere appearance, but of what?

The above statement from the Occult Diary echoes Schopenhauer's gloomy outlook. In a letter to Torsten Hedlund, Strindberg declares that he was brought up by three Buddhists, the first being Schopenhauer.⁷⁹ Buddhism imparted to Schopenhauer, among other things, a sense that suffering is intrinsic to life. Prince Siddharta, according to legend, broke out of his father's palace to witness for the first time sickness, old age and death, and this experience spurred his search for liberation. Schopenhauer combines this negative assessment of life with a deeply pessimistic metaphysics. For him the world is fundamentally blind will, appearing to us under the guise of various phenomena. Indeed we ourselves are ultimately manifestations of this same will.

Schopenhauer, for all his orientalism, inherits western metaphysics and its categories, particularly as formulated by Kant. He inherits the opposition of being and becoming, the language of reality and appearance. But rather than favouring an unseen reality that undergirds appearance, he abhors it. As ultimately creatures of will, we are trapped in ceaseless striving. Again, Schopenhauer is hardly unique in finding the world to be deficient. Any religion of salvation must find the world faulty, by definition, or there would be no need to save anyone from it. Schopenhauer too advocates salvation, in his case by stilling the will, a kind of extinction.

⁷⁹ *Brev*, vol. 11, p. 99

The significance of Schopenhauer for Strindberg is, then, above all his subjectivism. Schopenhauer famously declares at the beginning of *The World as Will and Idea*, "[t]he world is my idea." Strindberg, we have seen, finds that the world is perception. Thus also his experiments with points of view, without in the end deciding between them. As Strindberg put it in one of his letters, "[w]hy does the bee build a hexagonal cell? Because he is subjective, the bastard, and sees everything hexagonally with his hexagonal eyes. Why does a person see the planets and the Kanholm bay as round? Because the subjective bugger has a round eye."⁸⁰ Truth becomes subjective and relative, and choosing between points of view becomes impossible. On what grounds could he do so? For Schopenhauer, as for Strindberg, this makes the mutable world dream-like in its changeability. Strindberg's fundamental concern, Gunnar Brandell points out, "was not with rational ways of explaining existence, but with competing visions of the world."⁸¹ They differ on the issues of will and its extinction. Strindberg often speaks of the world as a faulty or distorted copy of a true and stable original, but this original is unavailable to us and unreachably distant. For Schopenhauer, on the contrary, will is intimate to creatures and to phenomena. In contrast to Schopenhauer, Strindberg does not advocate the extinction of the will. That subjectivity becomes fractured and unstable is a problem for Strindberg. His seeking for salvation is also a quest for stability of subjectivity. As the death of God produces confusion and removes epistemic guarantees for Nietzsche, the fracturing of the apparent world, its distance from being, produces confusion for Strindberg. But Strindberg, unlike Nietzsche, sees the world as fallen. Indeed the fallen status of the world consists in its lack of stability, in the failure of epistemic guarantees that leaves humanity dizzy.

⁸⁰ *Brev*, vol. 6, p. 36

⁸¹ Brandell, *Strindberg in Inferno*, pp. 161-2

To sum up: a number of Strindberg's later plays, although deeply marked by his religious turn, consistently undermine the salvific promises apparently offered. They do this by the dislocation of narrative and the fracturing of characters' identity. God has become unreachably distant and the world has become a desert. This is accompanied by a vision of the world as a fallen copy, deceitful and ever-changing, of a stable and truthful original. God and being have departed and left the world reeling. This has a history in both Strindberg's personal religious history and the growing crisis in Christianity, particularly Protestantism. In this context the Kierkegaardian demand to decide between faith and atheism is both urgent and unanswerable. The only Christianity available is one largely emptied of doctrinal content, because any coherent edifice of doctrine becomes untenable here. Rather, the plays again and again rehearse truncated versions of the Passion. Over and over, they commemorate the death of God.

2. To Damascus

Strindberg's 'Inferno crisis' finally drew to a close in 1896. A year later, as we have seen, he wrote a hallucinatory novel, *Inferno*, that purports to be an autobiographical account of this crisis. In 1898, he reworked a lot of the same material in part one of *To Damascus*. This marked the beginning of a period of frenzied creativity that lasted, more or less without pause, until Strindberg wrote his last play in 1909.

Strindberg wrote two further instalments of the play, part two in 1898 and part three in 1901. These were, however, afterthoughts. Strindberg originally conceived *To Damascus* as a single, self-contained play. This is clear enough from the peculiar structure of part one (discussed below). And although parts two and three continue to some extent the fantastic elements of part one, they are also more naturalistic. The stage directions for part three even stipulates the era (late nineteenth century) and the place (Austria, by the Danube). The setting becomes a particular time and place, and much of the overt strangeness has gone.

This chapter focuses on part one. My aim here is to bring to light the ways in which the play, despite appearances, resists a unitary, allegorical reading. The play's title itself suggests such a reading in its reference to the conversion of St. Paul, which I explore below. I argue, however, that the play cannot sustain this sort of reading. To put it in postmodern terms, the Christian grand narrative (or Christianity as a grand narrative) has become fractured if not fragmented. *To Damascus* is on one level an attempt to patch it together. Thus the play begins with a strikingly modern sense of estrangement, and attempts to overcome this estrangement by means of a somewhat

contrived allegory. The play represents the pilgrimage and salvation of one who feels himself damned. This in itself raises questions about the coherence of the salvific theme the play overtly endorses. The protagonist feels himself to be damned; he has been judged for forgotten crimes committed in a previous existence; and since he is already damned, he presumably cannot be saved. Yet by the end of the play, we are supposed to believe that he has accepted salvation, however tentatively. This may suggest a sort of patched coat: the protagonist, estranged, directionless and lost, contrives a solution by patching together a coat from the tattered remains of western Christianity. As Strindberg was to remark of his own conversion, years later, in his need he reached for whatever lay to hand.⁸² All the same, the holes remain and at times the protagonist feels them.

The play embodies many contradictions. These include: circular versus linear time; damnation versus salvation; old cosmology versus new cosmology. The play juxtaposes Christ and Satan, exile and pilgrimage. In this chapter, I explore these themes under the headings of i. Structure; ii. Cosmology; iii. Christ/Satan iv. Exile and Damnation or Pilgrimage and Salvation. Finally, in section v., I look at the play as a theatrical piece, addressing the question, what kind of theatre is this? The answer to that question is intimately linked with the other themes listed above.

But first we need to take another look at an issue that impinges on the play's coherence, namely its relationship to the life of its author. One way of making a coherent narrative out of this story of conversion would be to turn it into dramatised autobiography. By becoming an account of the conversion experience of the actual

⁸² August Strindberg, *Samlade Verk*, vol. 68 (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1988), p. 213

historical personage August Strindberg, it seems to take on a sort of factual coherence: this is what happened (albeit dressed up a bit for the stage.) The temptations to take this line are twofold: a long tradition within Strindberg scholarship, and some statements made by Strindberg himself. A recurring question for Strindberg scholarship is the relationship of Strindberg's writing to his life.⁸³ *To Damascus* particularly invites this question. This arises from the play's overtly autobiographical content, as well as its relationship to *Inferno*. The play's protagonist suffers from religious neuroses of much the same kind as the play's author, evident in the mixture of guilt and defiance. The Lady appears to be a depiction of Frida Uhl, Strindberg's second wife. The book whose content the protagonist attempts to keep secret is sometimes interpreted as Strindberg's *A Madman's Defence*, a depiction of his first marriage.⁸⁴ The visit to the Lady's mother resembles the time Strindberg spent with Frida Uhl's parents in Dornach in Austria. The play even mentions a cliff-side resembling a Turk's head that caught Strindberg's attention during his stay with his mother-in-law.⁸⁵ Now as I have mentioned, the play has an intimate relationship with Strindberg's *Inferno*, which also deals with a deep sense of guilt, religious conversion, and a hallucinatory journey toward a dubious salvation. Yet despite the clearly literary character of so much of the book (the ghosts' supper in chapter 1, for

⁸³ Strindberg is not the only Scandinavian writer to be interpreted by scholarship in this fashion. Malik notes, in *Receiving Søren Kierkegaard*, that much of the early Danish scholarship on Kierkegaard dealt with the difficulties in interpreting him by "a kind of biographical-psychological approach to the ... idiosyncratic Dane and his strange works" (p. 141). Martin Lamm, pre-eminent among early Strindberg scholars, treats Strindberg's writings in a similar vein, and much subsequent scholarship has followed suit, including Gunnar Brandell's magisterial *Strindberg in Inferno*. Some more recent work has found this apparently self-evident relationship between Strindberg's work and his life more problematic. See, for example, G. Rossholm et al (eds.) *Strindberg and Fiction* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 2001), especially the chapters by Lisa Teruel ("Defining Strindberg's Prose Fiction") and Piotr Bukowski ("August Strindberg's *Inferno* and the Absence of the Work").

⁸⁴ See, for instance, Michael Meyer's introduction to *To Damascus* in August Strindberg, *Plays: Three*, trans. Michael Meyer (London: Methuen, 2000), p. 181.

⁸⁵ Olof Lagerkrantz, *August Strindberg*, p. 278

instance, that was to re-appear in modified form in *Ghost Sonata*), the book closes with an assurance that it is a straight-forward factual account:

The reader who is inclined to consider that this book is a work of imagination is invited to consult the diary I wrote up day by day from 1895, of which the above is merely a version, composed of extracts expanded and rearranged.⁸⁶

Can we believe in the *Inferno* narrator's sincerity? Strindberg encourages us to read his writings as autobiography,⁸⁷ and yet he always withholds himself at the moment he seems to be revealing himself. This suggests an analogy with Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship, with which Strindberg was familiar. In the cases of both Strindberg and Kierkegaard the relationship of the author and the work is complex and paradoxical. Pseudonymous authorship introduces a rhetorical distance between the work and its author, making it difficult to discern the author's views. In Kierkegaard's case, his manner of writing has an inherent dramatic potential: writing under pseudonyms allows Kierkegaard to explore different points of view 'from within,' without overtly endorsing one over another. It allows a multiplicity of voices to enter his work, albeit a multiplicity governed, ultimately, by a telos leading from the aesthetic to the ethical and finally to the religious. For Strindberg, by contrast, his experiments with points of view undermined overarching teleological schemes. As one scholar puts it, "while Kierkegaard's dialectical process ends in the security of the Christian faith, Strindberg's repeated tests of varied commitments end in the withdrawal to a nihilistic standpoint, affirming only the belief that no commitment is valid."⁸⁸ Even at the moment he commits himself to faith, that faith is provisional.

⁸⁶ Strindberg, *Inferno*, p. 273

⁸⁷ In an early letter, from 1875, he famously declares "a writer is only a reporter of what he has lived." *Brev*, vol. 1, p. 190

⁸⁸ Eric O. Johannesson, *The Novels of August Strindberg: A Study in Theme and Structure*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 9

This is painfully clear at the end of *Inferno*: a narrative of conversion that ends in profound and aching uncertainty.

To sum up: despite the appearance of coherent closure, *To Damascus* is full of dissonance and indeed incoherence. It is, however, incoherent in an interesting way: its confusion arises in part from a sharp perception of the predicament of its protagonist. The play is important, in the context of this thesis, as the starting point for the particular kind of symbolic drama we are concerned with, one in which Strindberg engages deeply and paradoxically with religious themes. It is also, more broadly, the beginning of modernist, especially absurdist, drama.

i. Structure

To Damascus part one begins the trend towards a drama with a loose and non-linear narrative structure. It represents a radical change in dramatic technique from Strindberg's earlier work, and in particular from his naturalistic dramas such as *The Father*, *Miss Julie* and *Creditors*. I examine this in more detail in section v., below, but in summary Strindberg's naturalistic dramas were founded on an attempt at complete verisimilitude, in which the beginning and end of the play are linked by a tightly forged chain of cause and effect. *To Damascus* is, by contrast, a loose rambling succession of scenes, albeit arranged according to a symbolic pattern. The former is, in essence, still part of an Aristotelian theatre: as discussed in chapter 1, above, Aristotle required a drama to consist of essentially one action.⁸⁹ This manner of construction lends Strindberg's naturalistic plays, and perhaps *Miss Julie* in particular, a tremendous narrative drive. They move forward at speed. By

⁸⁹ See p. 25

comparison *To Damascus* is less obviously dramatic. *Miss Julie* is driven by the seduction of Julie, her ferocious battle with Jean and ultimately her destruction; *The Father* by the psychological fight to the death between the Captain and his wife, Laura. *To Damascus* contains no such external conflict. As Strindberg scholar Egil Törnqvist points out, instead of the narrative drive of the naturalistic plays *To Damascus* provides something vaguer and looser.⁹⁰ In the former scene succeeds scene by logical necessity, and the drama centres on a hidden crime. The latter concerns a much less specific sense of uneasiness. Törnqvist calls it "the evil of mankind, original sin."⁹¹ It concerns an existential dis-ease. *To Damascus* draws us into the protagonist's state of mind, and the protagonist's mind is the main arena for whatever conflict appears in the play. Because of this it takes on an allegorical quality, if we define allegory as personifying "forces, virtues and motives that are in dialogic with each other within the self."⁹² Allegory, however, requires a stable frame of reference, whether it be the pilgrimage of the soul or forces within the human psyche. Part of the play's achievement is to undermine the stability of its frame(s) of reference.

What then are its frames of reference? Principally, the conversion of St. Paul and the Passion narrative. To take St. Paul first: in Acts 9, Saul sets out from Jerusalem to Damascus with a mission to arrest any Christians he finds at the synagogue there. On the way, a heavenly light surrounds him: "And he fell to the Earth, and heard a voice saying unto him Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou,

⁹⁰ Egil Törnqvist, *Strindbergian Drama: Themes and Structure* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1982), p. 74

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, pp. 89-90

Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest.”⁹³ Saul, blinded by the light, is led to Damascus and there preaches in Christ’s name after his sight is restored. *To Damascus*, then, purports to recount the Damascene conversion of its protagonist, called simply the Unknown. This suggests a trajectory and a destination: conversion, and a release from spiritual blindness. The Unknown has lived, as the opening scene makes apparent, a life of debauchery. He has abandoned his children, drinks to excess, and in scene 1 seduces another man’s wife. He challenges God’s sovereignty, firstly by trying to make the Lady into his new Eve, and later by attempting in a vision to remake the universe into something that better fits human happiness. At the mid-point of the play, he awakens in a monastic asylum, where the Abbot curses him. From this moment, the Unknown begins his journey towards Calvary and a spiritual rebirth, in a sequence that the play itself suggests we should read as a modest version of the Passion. This raises a problem. The Unknown’s Damascene moment comes not as a blinding light, but more as a blinding darkness. Immediately preceding the asylum scene, the Unknown has defied God in the most overt possible terms: he has uprooted a crucifix from a roadside shrine and brandished it, shouting defiance at the sky. The pivotal moment in the Unknown’s narrative is, then, not a divine light but a total darkness: the explicit denial and rejection of God. Indeed, *To Damascus* seems to turn Acts upside down; instead of Saul persecuting God’s people, God persecutes the Unknown.

Before going further with this, we need to look at the way the structure of the play both contributes to its allegorical dimension and asserts a neat order – an order that the play, despite its pretensions, also undermines. To do this we need to turn to Egil

⁹³ Acts 9: 4-5

Törnqvist's detailed analysis of the circular structure of *To Damascus*. A look at the ordering of scenes shows how carefully Strindberg constructed the circular plot, scene succeeding scene according to the following pattern:

	17,1 Street corner	
	16 Doctor's home	2 Doctor's home
	15 Hotel room	3 Hotel room
14 Sea		4 Sea
13 Road		5 Road
12 Ravine		6 Ravine
11 Kitchen		7 Kitchen
10 Rose chamber	8 Rose chamber	
	9 Asylum ⁹⁴	

The play pivots around the asylum scene, and each half mirrors the other. The first half represents a descent, culminating in outright defiance of God, while the second half portrays an ascent towards atonement. Scenes therefore succeed each other less from dramatic necessity than from the imperative to fit each scene into this overall design. Because of this the scenes have a static quality: they seem like a series of paintings, like a medieval triptych or stations of the cross. Indeed, within the play the Mother refers to the last scenes as stations, telling the Unknown to "plant a cross at every station, but stop at the seventh; you don't have fourteen, like He did."⁹⁵ The outline of the play, then, is allegorical. It portrays the spiritual journey of a man into the black depths of sin and his subsequent expiatory suffering that ends in conversion and the hope of salvation. Looking from above, as it were, the meaning of the play

⁹⁴ Törnqvist, *Strindbergian Drama*, p. 72

⁹⁵ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel*, p. 86

seems clear. It appears to operate within a well-established and indeed very conservative theological framework of sin, guilt and redemption. Already, however, the play's circularity threatens to complicate such an allegorical reading. St. Augustine, for instance, objected to circular time as pagan and counter to the linear time required for a history of salvation. For him, Christianity is "the straight path of truth."⁹⁶ This sort of Christian teleology requires "the irreversible and nonrepeatable course of time directed toward salvation," while cyclical time "would dictate entrapment within a fallen world, and events in time would never intimate anything decisive beyond the endless succession of similar conditions."⁹⁷ Already, then, the structure of the play suggests that reading it as a simple Christian allegory may prove problematic, even as it pushes us to do so. However, it is when we look at the play in detail that the meaning comes unstitched.

This framework alluded to above implies both an anthropology and a cosmology – a view of the human predicament and a view of the cosmos. From the structure outlined above, the play would appear to belong to much the same mental world as the *Pilgrim's Progress*, or indeed to the Middle Ages. When we look at the protagonist of *To Damascus*, what we find is both akin to these and profoundly different. We see this in the opening lines of the play, when the protagonist (the Unknown) meets the Lady:

The Unknown: There you are. I think I knew you would come.

The Lady: You must have called me to you; yes, I felt it. – But why are you standing here on the corner of the street?

⁹⁶ St. Augustine, *The City of God: Books VIII – XVI*, vol. 14, Gerald G. Walsh and Grace Monahan (trans.) (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1981), p. 278

⁹⁷ Lawrence J. Hatab, *Nietzsche's Life Sentence: Coming to Terms with Eternal Recurrence* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 59

The Unknown: I don't know; got to stand somewhere while I wait.

The Lady: What are you waiting for?

The Unknown: If only I could say. – For forty years I've been waiting for something, I think they call it happiness, or perhaps it's just the end of unhappiness.⁹⁸

The Unknown lives in exile and waits, though he does not know what he waits for. While he is an everyman, in that he stands for the condition of all human beings, his situation is one of suspension. He exists without purpose, condemned to waiting without end: "If I only knew why I exist, why I'm standing here, where I should go, what I should do."⁹⁹

The resemblance here to later absurdist theatre, and especially to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, is informative. In the latter, Estragon asks where they are to meet Godot:

Estragon: ... You're sure it was here?

Vladimir: What?

Estragon: That we were to wait.

Vladimir: He said by the tree. (*They look at the tree.*) Do you see any others?

[]

Estragon: Looks more like a bush.

Vladimir: A shrub.

Estragon: A bush.

Vladimir: A-. What are you insinuating? That we've come to the wrong place?¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus/Ett Drömspel*, p. 7

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8

¹⁰⁰ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), p. 14

Godot's characters thus exist in a state of suspension, like the Unknown. Like the Unknown they live in the shadow of the death of God. Nietzsche's madman asks of this momentous event "who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? ... Where are we moving to now? ... Are we not continually falling? And backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an up and a down? Aren't we straying as though through an infinite nothing?"¹⁰¹ The implications of these images resound in both *Godot* and *To Damascus*. They imply a loss of any ontological or epistemological centre, the loss of any horizon within which to situate ourselves, a spiritual disorientation in which we seem to fall in all directions. For Vladimir and Estragon, as for the Unknown, they entail a loss of certainty: they no longer have any guarantee that they perceive the world as it is. Thus Beckett's tramps cannot even be sure what time it is: "But what Saturday? And is it Saturday? Is it not rather Sunday? (Pause.) Or Monday? (Pause.) Or Friday?"¹⁰² Similarly, the Unknown's perceptions of the world become a conundrum without a solution. Intermittently, he hears Mendelsohn's funeral march, but as he tells the Doctor he cannot tell if he really hears it or imagines it¹⁰³; he sees mourners dressed in brown rather than the traditional black, but cannot determine the truth of his perception¹⁰⁴; both he and the Lady see the face of the Doctor in the flowery patterns of the wallpaper in their hotel room, but cannot say whether the face is 'really' there.¹⁰⁵

The critic Martin Esslin defined absurdism as follows:

¹⁰¹ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 120

¹⁰² Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, p. 15

¹⁰³ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel*, p. 31

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 39

'Absurd' originally means 'out of harmony', in a musical context. Hence its dictionary definition: 'out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical.'¹⁰⁶

He explicates this by quoting Ionesco, who says the absurd "is that which is devoid of purpose.... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless."¹⁰⁷ Thus Absurdism is anti-teleological, and because of this it tends to place characters in a state of suspension, exactly as *To Damascus* does. The Unknown represents a predicament, rather than a character as traditionally conceived. This predicament, so well summed up by Ionesco, above, is one of suspension and isolation. This suspension and isolation clashes with the overt teleology built into the play's structure as outlined above.

The Unknown is, then, a very modern character, the alienated stranger. Among the characteristics of the alienated stranger is the withdrawal into an isolated self, separated absolutely from everything outside it. The Unknown appeals to the Lady, saying "I'm in a strange city, haven't a friend, and the few acquaintances I have seem more like strangers, almost enemies."¹⁰⁸ This kind of figure, the homeless stranger, exists inseparably from a certain kind of environment – the desert. Indeed, the desert defines him. In the introduction to his *The Disappearance of God*, J. Hillis Miller explicates the desert via a binary opposition: the city and the desert. The city is the creation of culture, but underneath and all around this artificial construct is the desert: "[r]eality is conceived of as gross, heavy, and meaningless, the desert of the world

¹⁰⁶ Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 23

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Strindberg, *Till Damascus / Ett Drömspel*, p. 8

before man”¹⁰⁹ and human transformations of nature are “mere subjective illusions.” So in *To Damascus*, the Unknown is the alienated outsider, the exile; lost, tormented by visions, wandering in the desert.

Miller further argues that the alienated subject turns in upon itself, becoming point-like, with the ironic result that the sense of self becomes precarious. Without a settled place in any social or cosmic order, the unity of the self comes under threat. This is, again, true of *To Damascus* and particularly of the Unknown. The play is littered with alter egos, from the Beggar to Caesar to the spectral figures in the monastic refectory. In the first scene alone he encounters two: the Latin-quoting beggar who shares with the Unknown a scar on the forehead, and more alarmingly the dead man waiting to be buried by the brown-clad undertakers in the café. Here again is the tension between the overtly allegorical aspect of the play and its own undermining of overarching explanatory frameworks. The allegorical role of the dead man is particularly clear. The resemblance to the Unknown is pointed. The Guests at the café discuss the dead man:

Guest I: Yes, he was a useless man who couldn't take life seriously.

Unknown: And he probably drank too much as well?

Guest II: He did.

Guest III: And he left others to support his wife and children.¹¹⁰

This echoes what the Unknown has already said about himself to the Lady. The corpse is both a warning and a representation of the Unknown's own spiritual death. The Beggar serves a similar role. The Lady belabours the point when she tells the

¹⁰⁹ J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth Century Writers* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 11

¹¹⁰ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel*, p. 21

Unknown, sententiously, "if you continue to drink, you'll become like him."¹¹¹ This obvious moralising and allegorising is undercut, however, by two factors: the subjectivism that casts doubt on every perception, lending the scene its hallucinatory air; and the suppressed but vibrant protest against conventional morality within the scene. To take the subjectivism first, the play constantly makes us uncertain whether anything is what it seems. The play opens with funereal music first approaching then receding. This recurs in later scenes, but neither the Unknown nor the audience ever know if the Unknown hears an actual funeral march or merely imagines it. As the Unknown sits with the pallbearers at the café, he asks why they are wearing brown instead of the more usual black. One of them sarcastically replies "To us in our foolishness it's black, but if Your Grace commands, then it is brown for him."¹¹² Is the pallbearer having a joke at the Unknown's expense, or is the Unknown hallucinating? The Beggar engenders a similar uncertainty. He bears an unsettling resemblance to the Unknown, as does the dead man, but the main result is not an allegorical or moral point but a sense of unease. No wonder the Unknown asks "is this a carnival or is everything as it should be?"¹¹³ As Törnqvist points out, the play "perhaps for the first time in the history of drama, makes the audience doubt their own senses."¹¹⁴ The scene provokes a sense of displacement, a rupturing of 'natural' order.

The second point, the protest against an oppressive moral system, is related to the first. The Unknown feels himself beyond the pale, and everyone else seems to agree with him. This is because he is a drunkard; he abandoned his wife and children; he

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 24

¹¹² Ibid., p. 21

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 24

¹¹⁴ Törnqvist, *Strindbergian Drama*, p. 88

refuses to submit to religious authority (symbolised by his refusal to enter church). He has quite deliberately broken social and religious bonds, and therefore falls outside the conventional moral norm. And yet he refuses to fall into line in part as an ethical protest at the injustice of social and religious bonds. He has suffered persecution, he says, because

I couldn't see the people suffer – and said so, and wrote: free yourselves and I will help you. So I said to the poor: do not let the rich bleed you white! And to women: do not let men oppress you! Finally, and this was probably worst of all, I told the children: do not obey your parents when they are unjust.¹¹⁵

This defiance of social bonds echoes the Gospel of Matthew 10:34-36, where Christ proclaims that he has come to bring a sword, “for I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law.” The echo is apt: Strindberg habitually associated Christ with rebellion against the established social and political order in the name of liberty. And, as we will see, in Strindberg Christ and Lucifer are linked. So it is no surprise that the Unknown tells the Lady that he lifted his fist against heaven.¹¹⁶

ii. Cosmology

I have argued that *To Damascus* conflicts with itself, because the play's structure asserts a coherent allegorical meaning that the play's text undermines. The conflict between coherence and dissolution, meaning and nihilism mirrors the conflict in nineteenth century literature between the old cosmology and the new. This cosmological shift emerges with full force in a number of modernist writers, not least

¹¹⁵ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus/ Ett Drömspel*, p. 13

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

in Beckett and Pinter, but was also present in nineteenth century writers in Sweden and elsewhere. Thus the writers of the "naturalistic breakthrough" in 1880s Sweden wrote against society and religious tradition, generally from a left-wing standpoint. For this movement, Church authority was illegitimate and religion had lost its credibility. However, they still believed in social progress – something that served as a surrogate for religious belief. The loss of credibility of the "old cosmology" was also felt by English writers. One passage in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* describes the way a myriad of scratches in a reflective surface will appear to form concentric circles around a centre of illumination.¹¹⁷ Thus the universe seems ordered around the needs and wishes of each individual. In this central passage, the appearance of a beneficent design in the universe is merely a product of point of view. The cosmos appears to have been created for our personal benefit, but this is because we see events as if arranged in concentric circles around us. There is in fact no design.

Cupitt characterises this shift as a move from an old, finite cosmos that resembles "a very rich literary text, full of hidden symbolism"¹¹⁸ to a modern infinite cosmos that is "morally and religiously neutral and without magic."¹¹⁹ In the old cosmos, "values, purposes, omens, portents, occult forces and meanings abounded in everything" while the new cosmos is a "meaningless", boundless mechanical universe."¹²⁰ In the old cosmology, the social order mirrored the order of the cosmos, and every individual could find her or his place. In the new cosmology, the individual is essentially homeless. J. Hillis Miller characterizes this in musical terms: "[i]n that old harmony man, society, nature, and language mirrored one another, like so many voices in a

¹¹⁷ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994), p. 255

¹¹⁸ Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, p. 17

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17

madrigal or fugue."¹²¹ In the shift to a new cosmology, we have experienced "the breaking of the circle, the untuning of the sky, the change from the closed world to the infinite universe which slowly destroyed the polyphonic harmony of microcosm and macrocosm."¹²² It is striking, then, that music becomes so important to Strindberg in his later plays. *To Damascus* opens with the sound of a funeral march approaching and then moving into the distance.¹²³ This march recurs at various points throughout the play, although, as we have seen, we can never be sure if the Unknown is merely hallucinating. At any rate, the musical harmony that characterized the old cosmology has become here a funeral dirge, one that torments the Unknown throughout the play.

And fittingly enough, those moments (and there are a lot of them) when the Unknown does read the world like a text "full of hidden symbolism" are more unsettling than reassuring. In scene 3 (the Hotel room), the Lady seems to see the face of her abandoned husband in the patterns of the curtain:

The Lady: Look at these curtains: do you see the portrait created by the flowers?

The Unknown: Yes, it's him!¹²⁴

The Unknown then goes on to see other patterns: "But I can see somebody else in the patterns on the tablecloth...this cannot be natural! No, it's witchcraft!"¹²⁵ At this point the Unknown hears the funeral march again. Of course both characters are suffering an acute sense of guilt here, the Unknown as a seducer and the Lady for leaving her husband. They arrive at this room after every other hotel in town has turned them away because they are unmarried. Adding to their sense of persecution,

¹²¹ Miller, *The Disappearance of God*, p. 5

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel*, p. 7

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 39

¹²⁵ Ibid.

they both recognize the room, for they have both separately stayed there before. They seem to be suffering mental torment as a special punishment, though whether this is merely for seduction and adultery, or if it has deeper roots the protagonists cannot be sure. As the Unknown says in the following scene, "I have been judged, but it must have happened before I was born, because I had already begun my sentence as a child."¹²⁶ The Unknown later bares his chest and in a scene reminiscent of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, cries "Come! Strike me with your thunder, if you dare! Terrify me with your storm, if you can!"¹²⁷ The Unknown's (and Strindberg's) sense of persecution at the hands of unseen powers echoes Lear's lament, "as flies to wanton children are we playthings of the gods." As Strindberg writes in *Inferno*, "[a]re not the gods jesting with us mortals, and is that why we too, sharing the jest, are able to laugh in the most tormented moments of our lives?"¹²⁸ In other words, the Unknown's suffering seems to him arbitrarily inflicted. The fact that he sees patterns and meanings written into everything around him does nothing to comfort him. The old and new cosmologies adumbrated by Cupitt clash here. In a sense, the play's main question is whether or not the Unknown is suffering a just and improving punishment at the hands of Providentially-guided powers, or is simply a victim of their arbitrary whims.

Something similar happens in the following scene (*By the Sea*), that begins when the Unknown exclaims "Quiet, I hear a poem coming..."¹²⁹ After hearing a rhythm like horses hooves and the sound of banners snapping in the wind, that the Lady insists is merely the wind in the trees, the Unknown goes on "But now I see – do you know

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45

¹²⁸ Strindberg, *Inferno*, p. 262

¹²⁹ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel*, p. 46

where? – in your weaving – a big kitchen [...] [with] three small recessed windows with bars on them [...]”.¹³⁰ The Lady becomes more and more alarmed as the Unknown, apparently in a trance, describes exactly her home and family. Here the Unknown almost literally reads the world like a rich literary text, but the effect is disconcerting and incongruous. Far from providing reassurance of an ordered cosmos, it seems almost grotesque.

iii. Christ/Satan

The Unknown resembles Falander, a minor character in Strindberg's early novel *The Red Room*. As Eric Johannesson's brilliant study of Strindberg's novels points out, Falander is a paradox, at once Christ-like and Satanic.¹³¹ Another character, Rehnjelm, comments on the way Falander takes on others' suffering and calms their sorrows, acting as a confessor and a guide. But at the same time, Falander condemns morality, proclaiming it to be “just malice assuming [...] a presentable form.”¹³² The shocked Rehnjelm later describes Falander as “fundamentally good, self-sacrificing, noble, generous - in fact I can't think of anything bad in his character - but he is immoral, and without morals a man is no good, is he?”¹³³ As if to emphasize his ambiguous standing, Falander himself seems to enjoy his bad reputation: on discovering that others have nicknamed him the Devil he replies, “Ah! The Devil? That's a good name.”¹³⁴ Now this is important because this kind of character crops up in a number of Strindberg's works (and Strindberg often saw himself in this sort of light). The Unknown is one such. The Doctor looking at a portrait of the Unknown

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Johannesson, *The Novels of August Strindberg*, pp. 40-2

¹³² August Strindberg, *The Red Room*, trans. Elizabeth Sprigge (London: Everyman, 1967), p. 148

¹³³ Ibid., p. 158

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 132

sees with horror that in a certain light the latter resembles the Devil.¹³⁵ Yet as we have seen, the Unknown has rebelled against God and religious authority because he "couldn't see the people suffer."¹³⁶ If he is a devil, he is an oddly moral one. However, his morality contradicts the prevailing moral code, which, according to the Unknown, enslaves everyone. He objects to morality as a *system*. I have already noted the echo of Matthew 10: 34-36. As the Innkeeper says of the Unknown: "He's one of those, who goes around and frees wretches from their duty."¹³⁷

The Unknown resembles another, almost contemporary, version of Christ: that of Dostoyevsky's "The Grand Inquisitor". In Dostoyevsky's tale, inserted into the middle of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Christ returns to Seville in the fifteenth century and attracts the attention of the Inquisition. The Grand Inquisitor accuses Christ of offering humanity an unendurable freedom. The Church has spent the intervening centuries since the crucifixion "correcting" Christ's work, as people want above all someone to bow down to. "You thirsted for a love that was free, not for the servile ecstasies of the slave before the might that has inspired him with dread once and for all ... we corrected your great deed... And people were glad that they had once been brought together into a flock and that at last from their hearts had been removed such a terrible gift, which has brought them so much torment."¹³⁸ Strindberg clearly has a view of religion similar to Dostoyevsky's Christ, for he says in *Inferno*: "Must you then humble yourself before God? But it is an insult to the All-Highest to drag Him down to the level of a planter who rules over slaves."¹³⁹ Clearly, the Grand Inquisitor

¹³⁵ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel*, p. 28

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22

¹³⁸ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. David McDuff (London: Penguin, 1993), pp. 294-5

¹³⁹ Strindberg, *Inferno*, p. 264

of Dostoyevsky's story believes this is exactly what people need. In his mind, Christ brought only suffering in the burdensome freedom he offered, and the Church had relieved that burden precisely by taking on the role of a "planter who rules over slaves." Indeed, the Inquisitor tells Christ that the Church was founded on what He rejected: miracle, mystery and authority.¹⁴⁰ In order that humanity might return to childish innocence and be happy, a select few in the Church had shouldered the burden and "taken upon themselves the curse of the knowledge of good and evil."¹⁴¹ The martyrs, by this account, have eaten the fruit of the Edenic tree in order to protect the rest of humanity from it. The serpent that encouraged them to eat this fruit would, then, appear to be Christ. This is almost Gnosticism: Christ comes to free humanity from the tyrannical demiurge, equated with the God of the Old Testament.¹⁴² The coincidence of Christ and Satan has roots as old as Christianity. Strindberg's way of thinking, like Dostoyevsky's, has this in common with Gnosticism: inasmuch as the Unknown is Christ-like, he is also Satanic, and like the Christ of the Grand Inquisitor (and indeed of the Gospels) he upsets worldly hierarchies.

The Unknown, then, offers a dangerous freedom, acknowledging that he has been hated and persecuted for it. He is emphatic that this was a rebellion not just against the social order, but also against heaven. Later, we find that this extends to a rebellion also against the order of nature. In scene 4 (*By the Sea*) the Unknown has a kind of epiphany:

This is what it means to live; yes, now I'm living, precisely now! and I feel my self swelling, stretching out, becoming thinner. I am becoming unbounded. I

¹⁴⁰ Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 295

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 298

¹⁴² Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 42 - 8

am everywhere, in the sea that is my blood, in the mountains that form my skeleton, in the trees, in the flowers; and my head reaches up to heaven, I look out across the universe that is me, and I feel the creator's whole power in me, because it is me. I would like to take the whole lump in my hand and knead it into something more perfect, more durable, more beautiful... would like to see all creation and every created being happy: born without pain, living without sorrow and dying in calm joy!¹⁴³

Here the Unknown pretends to the place of the Creator. His self expands almost to infinity, and he senses the world as part of his body. Sensing his own infinite creative power, he wishes to remake the world into something better. Thus the Unknown wishes to usurp God, and this makes him Satanic. In this vision, the Unknown resembles one of his alter egos, the madman Caesar, who "broods about nature's lack of proper order" and re-arranges plants according a more rational scheme.¹⁴⁴ The point is not lost on the Lady, who points out the resemblance immediately. Indeed it seems that Caesar may be there as a warning to the Unknown of the madness he risks. Yet the Unknown is at his greatest in these moments of rebellion. In the asylum scene, the Abbess informs the convalescing Unknown that they found him "on the mountain above the ravine, with a cross that you had broken off a Calvary and which you were using to threaten someone up in the clouds that you imagined you could see."¹⁴⁵ Despite the unintentionally comic note, the Unknown's defiance is at that moment heroic. And his revolt against morality, against God and the social order, is ethically motivated: he cannot stand the suffering he sees. This rebellion imbues the protagonist in his unregenerate state with a kind of heroism. He is not simply a sinner who must learn humility and repent: there is justice in his revolt. This of course

¹⁴³ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel*, p. 43

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 70

problematizes the play's whole redemptive scheme. Right at the play's beginning we find a *coincidentia oppositorum* in the Unknown, at least in his own account of himself. He tells the Lady how others have always hated him: "They have blamed me for everything. No-one in my town was as hated as me, no-one so despised."¹⁴⁶ So here he is, a scapegoat taking the blame for others. The scapegoat was one of Strindberg's favourite tropes, as we shall see in other works. Yet the Unknown is not blessed but cursed. He goes on to describe how priests cursed him from the pulpit and ends up by saying he raised his fist against heaven.

iv. Exile and Damnation or Pilgrimage and Salvation?

The wanderings of the Lady and the Unknown in the first half of *To Damascus* resemble a nightmarish exile. The characters themselves see their misadventures as a punishment, as we have seen. This is further elaborated in the allusions to Genesis. In the first scene, the Unknown enquires anxiously whether the Lady has read his recent work, and finding that she has not, he forbids her to do so. Later, prompted by her mother, the Lady breaks her word, reads the Unknown's last work, and recoils in horror. The analogy to Genesis is obvious, all the more so because when they meet, the Unknown 'christens' the Lady as Eve. So in scene 8 (just before the nightmarish, pivotal asylum scene), the Lady tells the Unknown: "it's as if I had eaten from the tree of knowledge: my eyes are opened, and I know now what evil is and what good is!"¹⁴⁷ The play seems to be collapsing into mythological confusion here. The Unknown is both the serpent who tempts with his book, and the God who forbids Eve to eat of the tree of knowledge. He is also, we have seen, a *coincidentia oppositorum* of Christ and

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 13

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 68

Satan. But that has a paradoxical coherence to it. Indeed it is a paradox, if a suppressed one, that has arguably always been present in Christianity.¹⁴⁸ Blake made use of it in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and Dostoyevsky at least alludes to the possibility in the Grand Inquisitor, as we have seen. It was also there in Gnosticism. Early Gnostic versions of Genesis made of the Old Testament God a tyrannical demiurge, from whose thrall Christ came to liberate humanity. In this version, Christ is the serpent in the Garden, and this of course alters Christian imagery entirely. In this Gnostic reading, the serpent represents divine wisdom, much as serpents still do in Buddhism and Hinduism.¹⁴⁹ Is the Unknown, then, a patriarchal tyrant or a Christ-like liberator? A tempter and seducer or a saviour?

The nightmarish asylum scene begins the attempt, carried through in the rest of the play, to squeeze all of this into a more or less orthodox box. Here we find figures, seated round a refectory table, all of whom look similar to characters elsewhere in the play, although it is not them. The Confessor describes them to the Unknown: a madman called Caesar, who lost his wits after reading a particular writer (with the strong implication that this writer was the Unknown); a beggar who will not accept he is a beggar because he speaks Latin; a pair of despised parents who worried themselves to death over their vicious son; an abandoned wife with two uncared for children.¹⁵⁰ The few crimes on this list that we do not recognise for the Unknown's deeds we can surmise are his. We learn that in his delirium the Unknown had accused himself of almost every crime imaginable, and imagined that he saw his victims. The

¹⁴⁸ See Goodall, Jane, *Artaud and the Gnostic Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), especially the introduction.

¹⁴⁹ For a contemporary version of this, see the recent Korean film *Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter and Spring*. Towards the end of the film, after his master has died, the disciple finds a snake in his master's bed.

¹⁵⁰ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel*, pp. 72-3

Unknown reacts with guilt and fear, refusing to greet this macabre company. The Confessor then goes to the lectern and reads the curse from Deuteronomy 28. Among the curses for disobedience to God's commandments are "The Lord shall send upon thee cursing, vexation, and rebuke, in all that thou settest thine hand unto for to do, until thou be destroyed, and until thou perish quickly; because of the wickedness of thy doings, whereby thou hast forsaken me."¹⁵¹ The Unknown has suffered God's curse. Now the play begins to suppress the *coincidentia oppositorum* in the Unknown. God's curse has fallen on him for his disobedience, for his breaking of social bonds and defiance of taboos; the justness of his revolt is suppressed. Having defied God, the Unknown begins his expiation and atonement, an atonement that involves submission to the authoritarian father God, as well as submission to the respectable social norms and rules that the curse in Deuteronomy re-enforces. This book of the Bible, after all, consists of a set of rules and commandments to regulate not just religious life but also everyday affairs, and the curse is to fall on the one who does not abide by these. The Unknown resolves to return to the Rose Room in his mother-in-law's house, and from here the order of scenes repeat themselves in reverse in a kind of undoing of the first half. The Unknown condemns himself in front of the Mother, then says he has begun to believe. The Mother observes that the Unknown's life has been guided by Providential powers, and the Unknown agrees. His suffering had a redemptive purpose. For example, the Unknown reports a torture undergone at the asylum: he awoke to find himself being stretched on a kind of rack. The Mother points out that he had probably injured his back and they did this to heal him. In other words, all the torments he has undergone were inflicted by a chastening power wishing only to do him good. If this starts to sound like trite religious kitsch, it is.

¹⁵¹ Deut 28: 20

The Unknown has not entirely lost his fight, however, telling the Mother as he leaves that "you are the most spiteful person I have ever met, but that's because you are religious!"¹⁵² In the following scene, the Unknown struggles to make himself kneel before a crucifix, and must finally call on God's help. From here on, the scenes of the first half are swiftly revisited, during which the Unknown is reunited with the Lady, and in the final scene the Unknown concludes that all that has happened has, despite appearances, been for the best. It ends with the Unknown disappearing into a church after the Lady.

Now this final scene, taking place on the street corner where the play began, deals with the Unknown's final conversion and in two very specific ways attempts to answer the sense of suspension, dis-ease, and lack of orientation encountered in scene 1. Thus, in this very brief finale (a mere two pages as against the first scene's eighteen), the Unknown remembers that he had failed to collect a letter from the post-office. At the end of the first scene, he had refused to collect it, assuring the Lady that it could contain only legal proceedings or other malevolence.¹⁵³ Here, at the end of the play, the Lady tells the Unknown to "believe it is a good letter":

The Unknown: Good?

The Lady: Believe it! Imagine it! ¹⁵⁴

The letter at this point represents the Unknown's conception of life itself. The question is, does it contain something fundamentally good or something malevolent and evil? The Unknown's decision to collect his letter becomes, then, a leap of faith. He has decided to believe that it is good and his faith pays off, literally: the letter contains money. The Unknown has misjudged life. He tells the Lady (and the

¹⁵² Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel*, p. 82

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 24

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 104

audience) "it looks nasty, this play, but it probably isn't! It was the Invisible I slandered, when I misunderstood..."¹⁵⁵ Thus events exonerate the world and its creator. Like Voltaire's Dr. Pangloss, the Unknown finds the world is fundamentally good, although even now he cannot be entirely sure. He says that it probably is not malevolent, revealing that he still has doubts. The final scene answers the first in one further way. In the middle of scene 1, the Unknown refuses the Lady's entreaty to enter the church, saying "It causes me pain and makes me feel [...] that I am an unblessed and that I can never again go there just as I can never become a child again."¹⁵⁶ There is here an echo of two passages from the Gospels. In Matthew, Jesus proclaims "except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." (18:3) In John, He tells Nicodemus "except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." (3:3)¹⁵⁷ Thus the Unknown feels himself excluded from salvation. He lives as one of the damned. He cannot become a child or be born again, and suffers therefore his state of lost wandering and waiting. Now in the final scene, the Unknown finds that at last he can enter the Church, yet from his remarks he himself seems a little unconvinced by his own conversion. As the Lady beckons to him to enter church, he remarks

The Unknown: Well, I can always go through; but I won't stay there.

The Lady: You don't know that! - come on! - Inside there you'll hear new songs!

The Unknown (going after her towards the church door): Perhaps!¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 19

¹⁵⁷ The Swedish of the 1917 Bible is particularly close to Strindberg's phrasing in the passage from John. The Unknown says "jag aldrig mer kan komma dit in lika litet som jag kan bli barn på nytt." John 3:3 reads "om en människa icke bliver född på nytt, så kan hon icke få se Guds rike."

¹⁵⁸ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus*, p. 105

Thus the final word uttered by the Unknown is a word of doubt: "perhaps." Looking at this final scene, it is little wonder that the Unknown seems himself unconvinced by it. It seems ironic that the object that signifies the ultimate beneficence of existence should be some cash in an envelope. Can this really hold the symbolic weight attached to it? Does a modest sum of money *actually* counter the palpable sense of alienation and loss in the earlier part of the play? The final scene is a forced attempt to close off and explain away the existential anguish of the first nine scenes. The Unknown is himself to blame: his lack of faith in God has been the source of all his misery.

v. Sacred Drama?

As alluded to above, *To Damascus* embodies a significant change in Strindberg's dramaturgy. To appreciate this fully requires, first, a more detailed examination of his naturalistic drama before investigating the change undergone in the post-Inferno dream plays. We can take the dramatic assumptions inherent in *Miss Julie* as representative of Strindberg's naturalistic phase. The entire play takes place in one room, a large kitchen belonging to the household of Julie's father. The action occurs over the course of one evening, and in fact takes about the time it would in real life. It thus adheres to a near-absolute verisimilitude. Strindberg's famous preface to the play further emphasises how thoroughly he had attempted to create a seamless illusion. Thus he says that in a naturalistic play the dialogue should wander; the scenery should be realistic; the lighting should not come from below, as it commonly did at the time, as it distorts the actors' faces and obscures their expressions; the

blocking should allow actors to move naturally; etc.¹⁵⁹ Strindberg's critique of contemporary theatre attacks above all its artificiality: it fails to produce a realistic likeness of the world. Strindberg thus delineates here a thoroughly Aristotelian theatre, in the sense that it aims for a more thorough application of mimetic assumptions. While Strindberg's naturalism contains within it the seeds of some of the developments of his anti-realistic post-Inferno plays, his overarching concern here is for verisimilitude.

The mimetic requirements delineated in the preface to *Miss Julie* are accompanied by a newly conceived aesthetic. Strindberg saw his naturalistic plays as the beginning of a "scientific" theatre.¹⁶⁰ The educated mind, he argues, has become by virtue of a more developed intellect incapable of a simple-minded identification with unreal characters acted onstage.¹⁶¹ To this he attributes the malaise in contemporary theatre. It plays entirely on the audience's emotions without appealing to the mind.¹⁶² The superior audiences of the future will derive their pleasure from observing and analysing the characters and action of a play. They will have laid aside "those inferior, unreliable instruments of thought called feelings" and look with indifference on "the brutal, cynical, heartless drama that life presents."¹⁶³ As these statements imply, Strindberg does not think of this ideal theatre as a spur to political action, asking rhetorically "why should [the world] be remedied?"¹⁶⁴ Rather, this drama accepts the world as it is, and offers the educated pleasures of learning and analysis.

¹⁵⁹ August Strindberg, *Miss Julie and Other Plays*, trans. Michael Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 63; 65-6; 66-7; 67.

¹⁶⁰ He conceived of his autobiographical novel *Tjänstekvinnans Son* ("The Son of a Servant") in similar terms as the "literature of the future." See p. 12.

¹⁶¹ Strindberg, *Miss Julie and Other Plays*, pp. 56-7.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 56

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 57

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 61

The ideal audience is then an audience of scientifically dispassionate, analytical minds. On this rests all the demands Strindberg makes on theatre. As well as those mentioned above, Strindberg desires that the audience should sit in complete darkness¹⁶⁵ the better to maintain its analytical distance from events onstage. His idealised theatre resembles a sort of laboratory.¹⁶⁶ Strindberg offers us a sample of the pleasures to be derived from such a theatre when he uses Darwinian language to describe *Miss Julie*, in which the character Jean "is the type who founds a species, someone in whom the process of differentiation may be observed."¹⁶⁷

The staging of Strindberg's naturalistic plays therefore rests on clear, well-defined principles. The staging of his dream plays is more problematic. In the case of *A Dream Play* itself, this results in part from the technical demands it makes, as we shall see. But *To Damascus* also, although technically less demanding, poses its own problems. This arises principally from the difficulty in answering the question, what kind of theatre is it? Strindberg was struggling to find a new form to fit what he wanted to do, and had no ready-made movement to provide any guidance, let alone clearly formulated answers. He never wrote any statement of principles for his dream plays equivalent to the preface to *Miss Julie*.¹⁶⁸ He was in any case much less ready to subscribe wholly to any movement at this point in his life.¹⁶⁹ I believe however that a comparison between *To Damascus* and the late medieval morality play

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 67

¹⁶⁶ This is not to say that what Strindberg actually achieves in *Miss Julie* is a theatre of scientific detachment. The play derives its power not from the analytical pleasures it affords, but from its extreme, almost luminous, emotional violence. It is only dispassionate in the sense that it presents the conflict between Julie and Jean without taking sides for or against either of them.

¹⁶⁷ Strindberg, *Miss Julie and Other Plays*, p. 61

¹⁶⁸ Unlike the preface to *Miss Julie*, the foreword to *A Dream Play* does not offer a detailed statement of theatrical principles. Rather it offers a brief, vivid, and poetic impression of what he intended his dream plays to be – and at that leaves much ambiguity and wide scope for interpretation, as I discuss in the next chapter.

¹⁶⁹ See Strindberg, *Inferno*, p. 262. See also below, pp. 213–4

Everyman, whilst not providing a definitive answer to what kind of theatre the former demands, provides a fruitful way of exploring this question. In the following discussion, it will emerge that it is not just their affinities, but also their differences, that are informative.

Everyman begins from the assumption of universal guilt, that all are tainted by original sin and stand in need of salvation. Furthermore, it accepts without question the justness of God and of the created order. Thus God enters at the beginning of the play and denounces humanity:

God: I perceive ... how that all creatures be to me unkind ...

They fear not of my righteousness the sharp rod;

My law that I showed, when I for them died

They forget clean...¹⁷⁰

Everyman is, then, guilty of transgressions against God's law. His guilt (and therefore that of the audience) is announced by God, who furthermore explains exactly what *Everyman* is guilty of. The Unknown also embodies a sense of guilt, yet in his case the crime is unclear:

The Unknown: [...] judgment has been pronounced, but it must have been

pronounced before I was born, because already in my childhood I had

begun to serve my sentence.¹⁷¹

Both thus entail the guilt of humanity: in the first case an external agency, the personal God, condemns humanity for its disobedience; in the second, guilt ceases to be the result of judgment by a superior being, becoming instead internalised – it has virtually become a condition of existence.

¹⁷⁰ J.B. Trapp (ed.), *Medieval English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 389

¹⁷¹ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel*, p. 42

The Unknown reflects therefore a vision of what it means to be a human being: it entails an inborn sense of guilt for unknown crimes. *Everyman* also concerns itself with what it means to be human. In the latter case, it does this by personifying aspects of Everyman – in other words, it uses allegory. Thus Everyman's drinking companions are personified in the figure of Fellowship, his family as Kindred and Cousin, his wealth as Goods, and so on. Confronted by Death, who informs Everyman that he must go on a long pilgrimage at the end of which he must render his accounts to the Almighty, Everyman calls on his friends and worldly possessions for help. One by one they enter, and to his dismay Everyman finds they cannot help him. Thus Fellowship abandons him, and Goods boasts of having lured him almost to damnation. The play thereby dramatises forcefully that the uses of wealth and companionship are all in this world. Facing death they cannot help him or us. Indeed, they hinder us. At his lowest ebb, Everyman then discovers his Good Deeds squeaking feebly at his feet, having been bound by Everyman's sins. Knowledge (standing for acknowledgement of sins) enters and persuades Everyman to make penance by scourging himself, after which his liberated Good Deeds rise from the ground. Strength, Discretion, Five Wits and Beauty then appear, swearing to accompany Everyman. However, as he approaches the grave they all depart, leaving Everyman to enter the grave accompanied only by his Good Deeds. The voice of an angel from offstage receives Everyman into heaven, and the Doctor enters to underline the moral of the play.

Everyman derives its dramatic power from the fact that the predicament confronting Everyman also ultimately confronts every member of the audience. The audience is

Everyman, and the play confronts its viewers with their own mortality. Everyman's story is their story. The Unknown in *To Damascus* similarly confronts its viewers with a situation which is also their own. But here the situation has altered: instead of pilgrimage, suspension; instead of progress, disorientation and uncertainty. *To Damascus* cannot sustain the linear progression from self-knowledge to contrition and ultimately salvation.

There is a further point of comparison here, in part with morality plays like *Everyman* and in part with late medieval mystery cycles. *Everyman* serves an obvious religious purpose: it aims to edify the audience by convincing them to embrace Christian piety and to lead the Christian version of the good life. It does this, in part, by making the audience uncomfortable. To work dramatically, it requires that the audience identify with Everyman and thus themselves confront their own mortality. The English mystery cycles, originating like the morality play in the late Middle Ages, depicted episodes from the Bible. They were communal affairs - each of a town's guilds would perform one scene, usually with some connection with the guild, at various staging points throughout the town. Like the morality plays, they served a didactic purpose, "[reinforcing] the message of sermons and other forms of religious instruction."¹⁷² In them God becomes a participant in the action, interacting with man. The story presented in the mystery cycles embraces the creation, fall and redemption of humanity. Thus the audience situates itself within this universal narrative. It therefore bound the audience and the players in a common Christian identity. The audience in Strindberg's day, as in our own, would not necessarily regard itself as Christian, and even if it did, would not be likely to find the salvific

¹⁷² Trapp, *Medieval English Literature*, p. 364

promise offered in the mystery and morality plays credible in that form.¹⁷³ *To Damascus* does not, and cannot, serve the didactic function of these earlier plays. Nor could it bind the audience in a common identity in the same way. And yet it does discomfort the audience, as does *Everyman*, but without the latter's context of a saving teleology. Or rather, while it tries to resolve its own internal contradictions in a salvific teleology, this latter aspect of the play is unconvincing, as discussed above. *To Damascus* does not work, either, as a psychological investigation of conversion. While Strindberg's naturalistic plays were in some senses part of a psychological theatre, Strindberg has here turned away from psychology.¹⁷⁴ This is a metaphysical theatre.

In it is also one of the earliest traces of the attempt carried out in a number of 20C theatrical practitioners to think of the theatre in terms of the sacred (or alternatively of the sacred in terms of theatre). A play-text does not become theatre until it is performed, and to that extent we have to be careful here. *To Damascus* is not, as the printed word, theatre. Yet it belongs to a line of thinking about sacred theatre. This is not because it belongs within a confessional tradition: as we have seen, reading it in this way is problematic. *Everyman* and the medieval mystery cycles are sacred theatre in the sense that they are subsumed within medieval Christianity and serve to reinforce Christian piety. In what sense, then, can *To Damascus* claim to belong to a sacred theatre? The former was a theatre at the centre of the culture, reproducing and reinforcing the central themes of Christianity. To borrow an image from Robert

¹⁷³ The drama critic Eric Bentley refers with contempt to a performance of another Strindberg play, *Easter*, he witnessed in Germany: "mention religion and your audience of solid citizens will put up with nonsense to an infinite extent. It is hard for a playwright to induce awe by any honest means, but by mentioning Jesus Christ he can do it in half a second." Eric Bentley, *In Search of Theater* (New York: Vintage Books), p. 130

¹⁷⁴ See below, on the treatment of character in *The Burnt House*, pp. 151-2

Brustein, the former is theatre performed, as it were, within a temple, whilst the latter is theatre performed amongst the temple's ruins.¹⁷⁵ One consequence is that in Everyman God himself comes on stage and becomes a part of the action. In *To Damascus* God has ceased to be a perceptible presence. But if *To Damascus* is, despite itself, theatre performed in the ruins, yet it still has a claim to be called sacred. This claim derives in part, in my view, from the paradoxical conflation of sacred and sacrilegious comparable with some writings on the theological fringe, like those of Thomas Altizer.¹⁷⁶ Altizer in turn draws on this strain within some Christian writers, especially William Blake. It also derives from a powerful strain within much thinking on the theatre, itself often employing paradox. Certainly the language of the sacred has become common currency amongst many theatrical practitioners in the century since Strindberg's death. One pertinent example comes from Peter Brook's famous *The Empty Space*, when he turns to the "Holy Theatre." Brook becomes, perhaps necessarily, discursive and vague when he talks of this. The closest he comes to a neat definition of holy theatre is to say

[The Holy Theatre] could be called The Theatre of the Invisible-Made-Visible: the notion that the stage is a place where the invisible can appear has a deep hold on our thoughts."¹⁷⁷

This is theatre opening onto the invisible. Of course, this leaves us with a huge question. Brook alludes to it when he asks of the wartime theatre in both England and Germany "was it a hunger for the invisible, a hunger for a reality deeper than the fullest form of everyday life – or was it a hunger for the missing things in life, a hunger, in fact, for buffers against reality?"¹⁷⁸ Brook's "Invisible" becomes, in

¹⁷⁵ Robert Brustein, *The Theatre of Revolt* (London: Methuen, 1970), pp. 3-4

¹⁷⁶ This is a theme I explore in the following chapter. See pp. 125-8

¹⁷⁷ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 47

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 49

Strindberg, a void. Whether this void is sacred or nihilistic is a question that haunts his plays, as we will see.

My argument here at least opens the possibility that a production of *To Damascus* could function as sacred theatre in the sense that performers and audience are bound together in a communal experience in which the sense of identity becomes a site of conflicting roles, as well as the site of an existential predicament. This conflict may itself open onto a kind of transcendence – but a transcendence without content. In this Strindberg was ahead of his time. Like the exemplars of what Brook calls Holy Theatre, Strindberg seeks the sacred, and like them he ultimately had to conduct this search outside and between traditions. Brook says of the nomadic American theatre troupe Living Theatre “[s]earching for holiness without tradition it is compelled to turn to many sources, many traditions.”¹⁷⁹ Hence Strindberg’s eclecticism, which becomes ever more evident in the other plays this thesis discusses, may have been an absolutely necessary part of reaching towards the sacred. This eclecticism itself undercuts the teleology underlying the kind of allegory *To Damascus* attempts to enforce on itself and on its audience. The possibility of a sacred theatre, and what it might mean, is a theme informing the rest of this thesis, and one which I return to explicitly in the final chapter.

Conclusion

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., p.70

The drama critic Eric Bentley, reviewing a production of *To Damascus*, accused Strindberg of purveying pretentious religious kitsch.¹⁸⁰ If we read *To Damascus* as a moral allegory, then he is right. Such a reading might suggest that the Unknown's various alter egos – the thief, the madman, the corpse – represent warnings that shock the Unknown out of his complacency and guide him on the path to repentance, with the ultimate result that he embraces the Church. Given this sort of reading the play does become trite and dull. And yet Eric Bentley's judgment is not fair. From a close reading emerges a much more ambiguous play. On the one hand, it seems to embrace a very conservative and moralistic version of Christianity; on the other, it performs at certain moments a Blakean inversion of Christianity. Because of this inversion, received theological categories begin to break down. Good and evil become difficult to distinguish, the centred self is constantly under threat from a proliferation of alter egos, and ultimately Christ and Satan become difficult, perhaps impossible, to tell apart. Indeed, they may be one and the same.

What begins to emerge in *To Damascus* is a response to Christianity as what the theologian Paul Tillich called a "broken myth." When a myth – such as the resurrection – becomes demythologised, the possibility of a "broken myth" opens. This is, in Tillich's words, "a myth which is understood as a myth, but not removed or replaced."¹⁸¹ The symbolic power of a broken myth is retained, although its symbolic character is made conscious. The language of symbol functions, according to Tillich, by pointing beyond itself. A symbol is not, however, arbitrary, as it participates in the reality to which it points. Furthermore, it "opens up levels of reality which otherwise

¹⁸⁰ Eric Bentley, *In Search of Theater*, p. 128-9. He does allow that a careful reading of the play might "dispel the clouds and bring something to light."

¹⁸¹ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), p. 50

are closed to us."¹⁸² A broken myth retains these functions, while no longer being taken literally. It would seem to provide an opening onto transcendence. This is, as Tillich makes clear, distinct from the alternative religious response to the de-mythologizing of religion, namely the retreat into literalism and fundamentalism. Tillich therefore shares an underlying motivation with Don Cupitt – to respond to modernity with a de-mythologized theology. Both begin from religion as a human experience, and in this sense both are existential: they confront the predicament of a de-mythologized world. In *To Damascus*, Strindberg also begins from this predicament. The Unknown confronts a de-mythologized world. The structure of the play, promoting as it does an allegorical reading, tries to reinscribe this de-mythologized world into a conservative Christian salvific myth. It fails, however. The symbolic language of Christianity, at least in this form, no longer opens up "levels of reality." It no longer opens onto transcendence. *To Damascus* therefore ends with a conversion that does not even convince the Unknown himself. Another property of symbols, as Tillich points out, is that they grow and, ultimately, die.¹⁸³ The play clings to a form of Christianity that even in 1898 was dying. Perhaps this is why Eric Bentley found it kitsch.

The play is, then, as Bentley says, a jumble.¹⁸⁴ Yet this jumble contains moments of clarity. Above all it depicts the predicament of the half-believers, those who live in the space vacated by Christianity as an ecclesial institution. Thus the Unknown's state of suspension at the beginning of the play, that prefigures the suspended existence of, for example, Vladimir and Estragon. Thus also the Unknown's oddly ambivalent conversion: in the last scene he says he will enter the Church, but he will

¹⁸² Ibid., p. 42

¹⁸³ Ibid., p. 43

¹⁸⁴ Eric Bentley, *In Search of Theater*, p. 128

not stay. The play occupies an uncomfortable position between atheism and faith. A question therefore lurks uneasily behind *To Damascus*. Without a linear, teleological theology and its embodiment in an ecclesial hierarchy, is Christianity still possible? In Nietzschean terms, is Christianity possible after the death of God?

For Strindberg, Christianity is ineluctably centred on the crucifixion. For Tillich, the crucifixion is the paramount religious symbol because it contains within itself its own undoing: "Every type of faith has the tendency to elevate its concrete symbols to absolute validity. The criterion of the truth of faith, therefore, is that it implies an element of self-negation."¹⁸⁵ An enigma, a secret lies beyond the symbol, but only to the extent that the symbol undoes itself. But what if, behind the symbol, lies the darkness of the abyss? For this is implicitly a possibility for a self-negating symbol. If so, how do we understand "the hollowness of the sign which forever empties itself"?¹⁸⁶ Does a divine abyss lie behind the symbol of the crucifixion, or a nihilistic void? In either case, the prospects for Christianity as an institution embodied in a Church and an authoritarian hierarchy look uncertain. And in this context, the Unknown faces a Kierkegaardian choice, but he is unable to choose.

¹⁸⁵ Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith*, p. 97

¹⁸⁶ Ian Almond, "Derrida and the Secret of the Non-Secret: On Respiritualising the Profane," in *Literature and Theology*, vol. 17, No. 4, December 2003, p. 465

3. A Dream Play

The previous chapter argues that despite appearances *To Damascus* problematizes Christianity as a narrative of salvation. The allegorical pattern of the play is undermined by its existential texture: the erosion of a coherent sense of character and narrative, the muted challenge to nineteenth century ethical and religious norms, the sense of a cosmos devoid of stable meaning. In *A Dream Play*, the allegorical and indeed mythic elements of the play exist in a similar tension with its existential texture. *A Dream Play*, however, confronts openly the questions that *To Damascus* rather suppresses. Even as it enacts a myth of incarnation and (ambiguous) liberation, it questions the possibility of the cosmic harmony on which such a myth ultimately relies. It does so in part by its concern for justice. This becomes especially apparent in the attack on theodicy, discussed below. While the play is less related to Christianity, and in fact embodies a religious syncretism, it still enacts a narrative of salvation. This narrative, however, ends in ambiguity. The strangely moving conclusion to *A Dream Play* does not offer any clear affirmation. Nor is it simply nihilistic. It ends, thematically, on a question – on the question posed by an empty space and a funeral pyre.

To put this in different terms, the play embodies a tension between myth and dream. On the one hand the play enacts a kind of Platonic myth; on the other, its dream construction threatens this myth with its anarchic instability. In a sense, it is caught between saying and unsaying. Plato's myth of the cave, alluded to explicitly in *A Dream Play*, makes the objects of this world imitations of Ideas or Forms. Book 7 of *The Republic* likens the world to a cave in which the inhabitants sit chained to a rock

watching shadowy images projected on the wall in front of them. Having never experienced anything else, they take a tree-shaped shadow to be a real tree, a table-shaped shadow to be a real table, and so on. If someone frees himself and escapes the cave he emerges into the realm of Ideas, and sees for the first time the Ideal tree, of which all earthly trees are an imitation, illuminated by the sun of the Good. Now while this makes of the world an insubstantial shadow-play, it also imbues the objects of this world with at least a provisional stability and identity. The trees we see may be mere shadows, but in their essential being they refer back to the unchanging Platonic form of a tree, and this Platonic form lends them identity and coherence, even if the shadow is ultimately impermanent and insubstantial. *A Dream Play* refers to the world as a cave, and also as a copy in which something has gone wrong. The reference is specifically Platonic. Yet its dream construction undermines any sense of Platonic realism by the mutability of the mise-en-scene and the characters. An object may be a tree in one scene, a hat-stand in the next. Character and perception, too, are mutable. This contrast between myth and dream might be clarified by a comparison with Gerard Manley Hopkins' conception of chromatic and diatonic harmony.

Hopkins sought to bind the apparently chaotic multiplicity of the world into a musical harmony, but noted that there were two kinds of harmony in music: "Diatonism is any change in things, any difference between part and part, which is abrupt. Chromatism is change or difference which is sliding or transitional."¹⁸⁷ For Hopkins, chromatism implies a gradual and spontaneous evolution, in which species are not eternal types but are "momentary and accidental coagulations of universal matter, developed without a break from the species below, and ready to flow at any time to a higher

¹⁸⁷ Miller, *The Disappearance of God*, p. 278

species in the perpetual stream of development."¹⁸⁸ Hopkins therefore favours diatonic harmony, because this means "organization can only be imposed downward from a realm of pre-determined types" – a principle Hopkins describes as Platonism or realism. In a chromatic world "[a]ll is 'bleared, smeared', and 'self in self' is 'steeped and pashed' in the perpetual flux. As a result, rhyming is impossible, and in a world where rhyme is impossible no principle of ordering remains."¹⁸⁹ In such a world, not only do the objects of perception dissolve in ever-changing flux, but the subject is also in jeopardy. *A Dream Play* portrays, in Hopkins' terms, a chromatic world in which "[t]he characters split, double, evaporate, condense, flow out, and are collected."¹⁹⁰ A Platonic vision of cosmic order, by contrast, provides the objects of the world with a kind of stability of identity, even if they are ultimately insubstantial compared to the original Ideas from which they draw their essence.

In the foreword to *A Dream Play*, Strindberg says that his narrative 'sways'. In writing about the play, I find my own narrative swaying, however straight I try to keep it. In what follows, I begin with *A Dream Play* as myth; I then discuss the staging, and in particular the way in which the play can be read as a move towards a Platonic, as opposed to Aristotelian, theatre; finally I turn to *A Dream Play* as dream.

1. MYTH

Strindberg's Cave

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel*, p. 108

Outside Sweden, Strindberg is famous as a playwright. It is less well known that he was also an artist. In 1901, at around the time he was writing *A Dream Play*, Strindberg did a painting called *Inferno-Tavlan* ('The Inferno Painting').¹⁹¹ Around the border we see what appears to be a dark fringe of leaves, roughly daubed, resembling a cave. The middle of the painting opens out onto a stormy grey sky, from which streaks of rain pour down onto a landscape or perhaps a seascape: we see a distant range of green humps that could either be hills or waves. This cave motif seems to reflect an obsession of Strindberg's. It first appears in a painting from 1892 called *Underlandet* ('Wonderland').¹⁹² In this, a patch of bright pinkish-white light appears in the middle of a field of variegated dull greens and browns, while in the foreground are a number of small pink flowers above a dark patch that may be a pool. By his own account, Strindberg sat down to paint a view of the sea from a forest, but found, when he had finished, a cave opening onto a patch of light inhabited by "disembodied and undefined beings."¹⁹³ He had inadvertently found an image that both embodied an old obsession with the sea,¹⁹⁴ and echoes in his post-Inferno plays, *A Dream Play* in particular. All these 'cave' paintings situate the viewer inside either a cave or a dense forest (he leaves it ambiguous), opening out onto a land- or seascape. They evoke multilayered associations. *Barnets Första Vagga*¹⁹⁵ ('The Child's First Cradle'), painted for his recently-born daughter Anne-Marie, again has a border of green daubs resembling leaves. In the middle, it opens onto a calm seascape painted in warm orange and red tones, a red sun just rising above the horizon. It

¹⁹¹ August Strindberg, *Inferno-Tavlan*, 1901, oil on canvas, 100cm x 70 cm, private collection

¹⁹² August Strindberg, *Underlandet*, 1894, oil on cardboard, 72.5 x 52cm, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm

¹⁹³ August Strindberg, *New Directions in Art! Or the Role of Chance in Artistic Creation*, trans. unknown, in Per Hedström (ed.), *Strindberg: Painter and Photographer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 180-1

¹⁹⁴ An obsession reflected throughout his paintings, as well as in a number of plays and literary works, not least *A Dream Play* and, as we shall see, the novel *I Havsbandet*.

¹⁹⁵ August Strindberg, *Barnets Första Vagga*, 1901, oil on paper, 45 x 38cm, private collection

encloses the viewer within a womb, opening out onto the sea of time and space. Thus the picture implies a process of becoming, of being born into the world and becoming incarnate. Here, too, the world looks welcoming and full of warmth. In other paintings, it is less so, although symbolically they are consistent with each other.

Thus *Inferno-Tavlan* opens onto a scene of storms. Its title has a double reference: it invokes both Dante's *Inferno* and Strindberg's account of his crises in Paris. The latter reference suggests that this painting is in some sense a self-portrait, evoking the emotional storms he suffered. The cave or forest from within which the storm is seen implies, again, existence in the material world. As a forest, it calls to mind the beginning of Dante's *Inferno*, where the narrator finds himself lost in the midst of an impenetrable forest. The forest for Dante represents the material world, in which he has become a lost wanderer.

In the course of Strindberg's "Inferno-crisis" and its aftermath the imagination as an *image-making* faculty took on great importance. Partly under the influence of Swedenborg, Strindberg came to regard images as having a revelatory power that words lack.¹⁹⁶ It is not surprising, therefore, that *A Dream Play* seeks to use images to address the audience directly, without words. Thus the play reproduces these mythical cave images in its *mise-en-scene*. After one scene-change, a shabby wall runs across the stage, and

[i]n the middle of the wall is a gate which opens onto a path that leads out to a green, light place where an enormous blue aconite is seen.¹⁹⁷

Like his 'cave' paintings, this places the audience (and the actors) within a confined space, the confinement here emphasized by the wall, with an opening into an ill-

¹⁹⁶ Harry G. Carlson, *Out of Inferno: Strindberg's Reawakening as an Artist* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), pp. 264-7

¹⁹⁷ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus/ Ett Drömspel*, p. 119

defined area of light. In the paintings, what we see in the clearing is ambiguous in terms of form. Here it is ambiguous symbolically. If we are in a cave, as the audience, are we looking deeper into the cave at another image, or are we looking out? The clearing contains an enormous blue aconite. This too is ambiguous. Aconite is a poison as well as a medicine against fever. In small doses it produces numbness and sleep. It stands for both poison and cure, sleep and the remedy for fevered dreams.

It is worth emphasising here the Platonic background to these cave-like images. In the paintings discussed above, the cave opens out onto the world of matter, the world of everyday existence. The cave itself is both a womb and a prison. In Plato's myth, men and women sit bound to a rock, looking at shadows that they take for reality. In Strindberg's paintings, this shadow play has become a seascape of shifting, evanescent forms. This seascape is sometimes calm, sometimes stormy, but the sea here becomes the world of ever-changing forms. It becomes, indeed, *maya*.¹⁹⁸

As well as the Platonic, there is here, also, a Neoplatonic background. Because of his interest in literature and allegory, the best way to approach this is probably through Porphyry, but first, as a precondition, we need to look, however briefly, at the philosophy of Porphyry's teacher, Plotinus.¹⁹⁹ In contrast to a great deal of Christian theological language that evokes a personal God who creates the cosmos (and, utterly transcendent, stands outside creation yet has a relationship with it), Plotinus holds that the world is the emanation of what he calls the One. The One, Plotinus tells us, remains unmoving and unchanging, yet from it the cosmos arises in the same way as

¹⁹⁸ I return to this below, pp. 105-7. Also p. 106, n. 251

¹⁹⁹ This is, necessarily, a very cursory treatment of Plotinus.

light emanates from the unchanging sun.²⁰⁰ The One is also said to “overflow.”²⁰¹ By stages, the overflowing of the One ‘descends’ until, the emanation of the One attenuated almost to nothing, it becomes matter. Thus a deep unity underlies the apparent multiplicity of the world. Thus, also, birth into the world is a descent and a forgetting of our true divine nature. Porphyry, in his famous allegory *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, makes of the description of a cave in Homer’s *Odyssey* a concrete image of this descent into the world. He begins by pointing out the ancient lineage of cave imagery. The cave, Porphyry tells us, has always represented the world. The hard, resilient rock that forms the cave resembles matter. In itself it is dark, obscure and formless, as matter itself is. However, by being shaped into forms it becomes visible and sensually appealing. The Platonic background to the images discussed above (both the paintings and the set) implies bondage to a world of illusory sense perceptions. The Neoplatonic suggests in turn a descent into the world and a forgetting. As we shall see, *A Dream Play* begins with a literal descent into the world. Taken together, this places both the characters of the play, and the audience watching it, within the cave, lost in the forest of materialism.

A Dream Play begins with a literal descent into the world. As with all salvific myths, the world is necessarily seen as imperfect. Indra’s Daughter finds herself on a cloud being drawn down towards the Earth. Gazing down and seeing the world’s beauty, Indra explains that it was once more beautiful “in the morning of time; then something happened, a disturbance in its orbit, or perhaps something else, a rebellion followed by a crime, which had to be suppressed ...”²⁰² Hearing Indra’s unkind

²⁰⁰ Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 353–4

²⁰¹ Ibid., p. 361. Plotinus is careful to mark this ‘overflowing’ as a metaphor, not a literal action.

²⁰² Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel*, p. 110

words about humanity, she proclaims that he judges them too harshly. As she sinks further, he tells her that the Earth is

[N]ot the best [world], of course, but not the worst either,
it is called Dust, it rolls round like all the others,
and so the inhabitants sometimes get delirious,
on the borderline between folly and madness²⁰³

Taking on human life, the Daughter at first sees life naively. She frees the Officer from his confinement in the growing castle, only for him to endure the frustration of never meeting his true love, Victoria. She marries the Lawyer and they have a child, only to discover how difficult marriage and parenthood are. She witnesses the lot of both rich and poor, and finds that human life is extraordinarily difficult for both. Plunged into the chaotic confusion of experience, she gradually forgets her own nature until, in Fingal's Cave, she re-awakens and finally she is consumed by fire. This myth incorporates the motifs of Porphyry's work: the descent into generation and the final release into the realm of the Gods. It also incorporates the Christian motif of incarnation, and perhaps also of kenosis – the self-emptying of God taking on human mortality. The daughter descends, forgets her godhood and takes on a fully human life, including marriage and children, and dies, not on the cross, but in a cosmic conflagration.

Underlying this is still a way of thinking that is largely Christian, however. Despite its exotic trappings, the prologue reproduces original sin as the cause of suffering. Strindberg is typically vague, but it involves a first crime, a rebellion that had to be suppressed. A certain moral ambivalence intrudes here: the prologue leaves it unclear

²⁰³ Ibid., p. 112

who to blame for humanity's bad behaviour. The rotation of the earth makes people dizzy, half mad, and so not really culpable. The implicit authoritarianism of this conception of original sin (humanity falls by disobeying God's command) would never have sat very easily with Strindberg. Indeed, early on in his career he wrote a fragment of a play embracing full-blown Gnosticism, in which the God of the Bible is an evil usurper and the serpent comes to liberate humanity from His tyranny.²⁰⁴ In this Gnostic fragment, Christ also arrives to free humanity, and God punishes him with crucifixion. *A Dream Play* refers to Christ, also, as one who disrupts the social order. This disruption is intimately linked with the question of justice. The Lawyer, so polluted by the vices and sufferings of the people he has defended that his hands turn black, is crowned by the Daughter with a crown of thorns. The legal establishment refuses him a doctorate, because he has taken the side of the poor and the condemned.²⁰⁵ As with Strindberg's novel, *The Scapegoat*, the Lawyer, as advocate for poor frail humanity, represents Christ. Implicitly, therefore, humanity needs an advocate. This implies that the social and indeed cosmic order (the two being intimately linked) is not just. "Justice, which so often is unjust," as the Lawyer says.²⁰⁶ God as an authoritarian father figure seems distinctly lacking in justice. In another reference to Christ, the Lawyer tells the Daughter that a liberator once came, and that he was crucified by all the right-thinking people.²⁰⁷ The play calls into question the justice that ultimately underpins Plato's myth, and indeed underpins Christianity as a narrative of sin and redemption.

²⁰⁴ August Strindberg, *Samlade Skrifter*, vol. 2, John Landquist (ed.), (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1912), pp. 307 – 319. This was the 'Efterspel,' a sort of coda to the verse version of *Master Olof*. Years after the events of *Master Olof*, Olof and his sons sit down to watch a play put on by a travelling troupe outside Stockholm. This play within a play is comprised of the Gnostic drama outlined above.

²⁰⁵ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel*, p. 135

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 137

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 167-8

As we have seen, the play resembles Strindberg's "cave paintings" both thematically and in the mise-en-scene. It is no surprise, then, that one scene explicitly takes place inside a cave, and it is in this scene that the Daughter awakens to her divine nature and sees the world for what it is. Near the end of the play, the Daughter transports the Poet to Fingal's Cave. This is an actual cave existing on the Hebridean island of Staffa off the Scottish coast which also served as the inspiration for the composer Mussorgsky's *Hebrides Overture*; it is the destination of the giant's causeway that begins in Northern Ireland and consists of hexagonal columns resembling paving blocks. The Daughter tells the Poet that this cave exists at "the world-sea's farthest limit."²⁰⁸ She identifies the sea with the world, and in Fingal's cave is able to stand at its edge, almost outside it, as is the Poet. From here the world appears as a sea troubled by terrible storms.

Strindberg used the sea as an image of worldly life on a number of occasions in both paintings and novels, but here his use of it has subtly changed. Strindberg's novel *I Havsbandet* ("By the Open Sea") makes particular use of sea imagery that correlates with another series of sea paintings from the 1890s. These paintings all have the same general form: a beach in the foreground, merging into the sea in the middle distance, in turn only just made distinguishable from the sky by an almost invisible horizon. On the beach, in the foreground to one side, stands a solitary flower. These paintings move close to abstraction, the beach, sea and sky becoming bands of colour. Thus, in *Den Ensamma Tisteln* ("The Solitary Thistle")²⁰⁹, a small green thistle grows in the bottom right of the painting, standing on a pale yellow shore that blends into a pale blue sea. The sky, the same colour as the sea, is only distinguishable by a faint shift

²⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 172

²⁰⁹ August Strindberg, *Den Ensamma Tisteln*, 1892, Oil on Panel, 19 x 30cm, Private Collection

of colour at the horizon. Like many of Strindberg's paintings, there seems to be an autobiographical element to this. The thistle, prickly and stubborn, seems an ironic reference to Strindberg's own sense of self. This ego is the only source of orientation in a landscape that has become weightless and insubstantial. The delicate tonal shifts of the almost abstract bands of colour suggest a potential for a sort of aesthetic transcendence of the ego, in which the sense of self becomes vague and as it were floats. But the prickly thistle seems to oppose this, asserting a stubborn determination to hold onto a firm sense of self in a world without fixed points of reference. Indeed the ego becomes here the only fixed point of reference. This was the seed of Strindberg's dislike of Theosophy: he saw the destruction of the ego, the world's fixed point, as madness.²¹⁰ Strindberg's novel *I Havsbandet* opens with the protagonist's perilous journey in an open boat to an island at the edge of the archipelago where he is to take up the post of fisheries inspector. Although he has no nautical experience, he wrests control of the boat from its captain by sheer force of will and navigates across a sea that threatens to swamp the boat and drown everyone in it. The sea corresponds to the world, and it is wild, unthinking and dangerous. It is not governed by any Providential purpose, and bears no mark of design. Inspector Borg, the protagonist, uses his superior intelligence and refined perception to ride the currents, avoid the dangerous crests of breaking waves, and steer the boat in to land. His ego and the force of his will become the only means of steering a course through the sea.

In *A Dream Play*'s Fingal's cave scene, the Poet and the Daughter look out on a sea that is also perilous. They see a ghost-ship, the Flying Dutchman, crossing the waves.

²¹⁰ Thus, for instance, *Inferno*'s narrator comments "the denial and mortification of the Ego ... to me seemed and still seems an insane idea." Strindberg, *Inferno*, p. 168. See also Lamm, *Strindberg och Makterna*, p. 135-6

This transforms into an ordinary ship in a stormy sea, heading for a reef. The crew of the ship are in peril of their lives without knowing it. Like the crew of the little boat in the opening chapter of *I Havsbandet* they exist in a perilous world, yet human efforts to steer a course seems insignificant here. And while Inspector Borg and the rest of his boat's crew face death, the peril confronting the crew of the foundering ship in *A Dream Play* is perhaps more desperate: they find themselves bound to a life in which there are no fixed points, but in which the assertion of will by superior intellect does not in essence ameliorate their predicament. This is the sea of time and space, of an insubstantial, unstable and perilous existence in the material world. By implication, the life portrayed in the rest of the play is precisely this life on a storm-tossed sea. In essence, the characters in the play are the crew of the ship perishing in the storm. The play also implies that its audience, too, are like the crew of the ship. I return to this below.

There is a further point of comparison between the Fingal's cave scene and *I Havsbandet*. In Chapter 3 of the latter, Inspector Borg takes a boat out into the water around the island where he now resides to inspect the fishing-grounds. After some hours, he finds his attention shifting to the spring pack-ice drifting by. At first he finds that the cracks in the ice resemble a map with "islands, bays, inlets, straits."²¹¹ Where the ice has run aground and piled up it

created vaults and formed caves, built up towers, ruined churches, fortresses
[...] Here the blocks had piled up like cyclopean stone, organizing itself into

²¹¹ Strindberg, *Samlade Verk*, vol. 31, p. 32

terraces like an Assyrian-Greek temple; there the repeated hammering of the waves had carved out a Romanesque arch.²¹²

All this resembles the work of human hands, despite being the chance result of natural forces. Yet this passage also testifies to the mutability of matter. Sea-ice worked on by wind and waves comes to resemble everything from an intricate map to a Greek temple, but without the work of either a cartographer or an architect. In the Fingal's cave scene, again, forms mutate into each other. Thus the Poet sees the ship transform itself:

Poet: ... I don't think it is a ship ... it's a two-storey house with trees outside ... and ... telephone poles ... a tower that reaches into the skies.²¹³

This transformation resembles the way the sets change within the play.²¹⁴ Inspector Borg is a Nietzschean superman, turned by Strindberg into a tragic hero. He speculates on the continuity of matter and life, implying perhaps a Schopenhauerian vision of blind will forming matter in a way that appears deceptively purposeful. Underpinning this, however, is an absence of meaning. It is a world without the possibility of escape. *A Dream Play* confronts the void, but rather than pointing to a nihilistic abyss, it refuses to interpret it.²¹⁵

Plotinus allegorizes the Odyssey as an escape from the binding power of material life in Odysseus' flight from the sorcery of Circe and Calypso.²¹⁶ Strindberg perceived his own predicament in similar terms, of being bound to the world. In a letter to his Theosophist friend Torsten Hedlund, he writes "...I hate the world because it binds

²¹² Ibid., pp. 32-3

²¹³ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel*, p. 182

²¹⁴ See below, pp. 96-7

²¹⁵ See below, pp. 120-4

²¹⁶ Plotinus, *The Enneads*, p. 54

my spirit, and because I love it."²¹⁷ In *A Dream Play*, the characters are similarly bound to the world by desire and by love. The play, then, enacts a Neoplatonic myth. Returning to Porphyry, his allegory deals, above all, with the cave on Ithaca described in Homer's *Odyssey*, containing jars of honey, stone looms and running water. The cave has one entrance for mortals, another for the gods. Porphyry gives a detailed allegorical reading of all aspects of the cave as Homer describes it. Thus the water that flows through the cave symbolises the mutability of matter, its ever changing impermanence and perpetual flux. This water is also associated with generation, sexual delight and reproduction. Moist spirits are drawn to water. The stone looms are bones, onto which flesh is woven. The cups filled with honey are associated with sleep and the descent of the soul into the world, (Porphyry points out that Saturn was put to sleep with honey). Drawn to worldly delights, the spirits take on physical form. The object of the wise is to escape the world of generation and flux represented by the cave, exiting through the portal of the immortals, "in order that, being at length divested of the torn garments [by which his true person was concealed], he may recover the ruined empire of his soul."²¹⁸

There is a tension, then, between the Platonic, with its fixed forms and eternal essences, and the ever-changing flux of a dream. Within this dream, no form is stable, all is mutable. For Strindberg, the world has gone wrong. Even in the prologue there are three different explanations of this: a disturbance in the earth's orbit; a rebellion followed by a crime; or the rotation of the earth making its inhabitants dizzy. Cosmic discord threatens the cosmic harmony. Deeply implicated in this is the play's challenge to theodicy. We will examine this in more detail later,

²¹⁷ *Brev*, vol. 11, p. 99

²¹⁸ Porphyry, *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, trans. Thomas Taylor (Grand Rapids: Phanes Press, 1991), p. 56

after first looking at the stage technique of *A Dream Play*. This needs proper examination first of all because any interpretation of the play must take this into account: it is intimately connected with the mythic themes of the play. Secondly, it represents the fullest development of the anti-naturalistic tendency in Strindberg's later writing. Thirdly, any theological investigation of the play involves a question that has puzzled every commentator and director who has dealt with *A Dream Play*. Who exactly is the dreamer?

2. STAGING

Apart from the mythical Prologue, which was added a few years after the rest of the play was written, *A Dream Play* does not have any framing devices. This is unlike medieval or classical dream allegories, where someone would fall asleep and have a symbolic, meaningful dream. The framing devices in the latter serve to provide a stable frame of reference for interpreting the dreams, and without that the meaning becomes slippery. *A Dream Play* does, however, have internal frames. This is particularly apparent earlier on, with a series of dreams within dreams. The internal frames themselves are not, however, stable. Instead there is a movement of the mind and imagination, as from the very beginning Strindberg suspends ordinary causal narrative logic: shifts take place according to flashes of imagination and free-association. Thus, in the first scene, the Daughter becomes certain that the castle contains a prisoner, and that her duty is to free him.²¹⁹ The castle opens up and the Daughter finds the Officer inside, waiting for her.²²⁰ The Officer complains that life has wronged him, whereupon he and the Daughter freeze and a dream within the dream begins. A partition is removed, and a scene follows between the Mother and

²¹⁹ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel*, p. 113

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 113-4

the Father.²²¹ It reads almost like a cinematic flashback – the Daughter and Officer are clearly witnessing a scene from the Officer's past. Again, we have the free-associative progression, but the 'frame' around this scene turns out to be porous when the Officer unfreezes and approaches the Mother. Strindberg produces an effect of great strangeness when the Mother, who seems to exist only in the Officer's memory, asks

Mother Who is that girl?

Officer (whispering) It's Agnes!²²²

The dialogue at this point collapses the 'frame' around the scene. A similar effect is produced a few lines later:

Officer To think that that cupboard can still be there after twenty years ...

We've moved so many times, and my mother died ten years ago!

Mother Well, what about it? You have to question everything...²²³

The narrative is not governed by naturalistically conceived causality, and space and time exist here within the minds of the characters.

Thus the opening up of frames within frames which then dissolve into each other contributes to the dreamlike sense of unreality in the play. *A Dream Play*, however, makes much more extreme demands on the staging than this. One scene change requires the following:

The scene changes to a lawyer's office, with the curtain up [ie. in full view of the audience], thus: the gate remains and functions as the gate to the office railing which extends right across the stage. The DOORKEEPER'S room

²²¹ Ibid., p. 115

²²² Ibid., p. 116

²²³ Ibid., p. 117

remains as the LAWYER'S nook containing his desk ... the lime tree, stripped of leaves, is a hat and clothes stand.²²⁴

Strindberg struggled to get the play produced for five years before it had its premiere at Stockholm's Intima Teatern in 1907.²²⁵ While this was not the first time Strindberg had difficulty persuading theatres to produce a play, in this instance a large part of the problem was clearly the technical demands it makes.²²⁶ The original production at Intima Teatern attempted to meet the challenge of staging *A Dream Play* with a kind of projector called a scioptikon. The scioptikon did not work smoothly, leading to lengthy blackouts between scenes that broke up the flow of the play. Why does Strindberg make such difficult demands of the staging? In part, it is clearly to reinforce the dreamlike quality of the play on stage. Indeed, one review of the original production complained that instead of seeing the enchantment of a dream made tangible, the audience got heavy stage machinery.²²⁷ Together with long pauses between scenes it destroyed the illusion of a dream.

The scene-changes help, then, to create the dream-like atmosphere of the play, but there are also two further points. They reflect Strindberg's thinking on perception and artistic creation, formulated in part in his essay "New Directions in Art"; and they create a kind of embodied metaphor, extending the metaphor of life as a kind of dream into the physical trappings of the stage. In "New Directions in Art", Strindberg notes the pleasure he derives from seeing unfinished sketches made with leftover paint. They set the imagination in motion, and every time he sees these sketches he

²²⁴ Ibid., p. 131

²²⁵ In 1905, for instance, he attempted to get a French version of *A Dream Play* (entitled *Reverie*) produced in Paris.

²²⁶ In his campaign to persuade theatres to put on the play, Strindberg wrote to a number of them suggesting simplifications and cuts. Strindberg, *Samlade Verk*, vol. 46, p. 153

²²⁷ Strindberg, *Samlade Verk*, vol. 46, p. 159

sees something new.²²⁸ Strindberg finds that imagination is integral to seeing, as is his state of mind. Thus in *A Blue Book* the Teacher tells the Pupil that he had once had a room that seemed to him the most beautiful in the world:

It had not always been beautiful, but great, meaningful events had occurred there; a child was born there, a man died there. [...] One day [...] I showed it to a guest. He happened to be a "black man", hopeless and despairing, who only believed in fists and anger [...] The man stood in the middle of the room, looked around him, and muttered: I can't see it! – When he said that, the room got darker; the walls closed in, the floor shrank, and my temple full of light was transformed before my eyes, so that I saw it as a hospital room with cheap wallpaper, the lovely floral curtains looked grubby, the little white desk was covered in ink-spots, and the gilding had gone black; the tile-stove's brass doors were dull – the whole room was changed, and I felt ashamed.²²⁹

The Teacher's fond memories and the emotional attachments evoked by the room make it beautiful. However the presence of a cynical stranger turns it into a cheap, decaying room that resembles a hospital. This could be interpreted to mean that the Teacher's fond memories turned an ordinary room into something heavenly, and when the stranger entered the Teacher simply saw it as it was. However the passage does not support this interpretation. The Teacher says at the end of this statement that the room was "förtrollad," a word that means either enchanted or bewitched but does not have the positive or negative connotations of those words. This could mean that the room had been enchanted by the Teacher's memories, but because this statement comes last it rather implies that the stranger's presence had caused the room to

²²⁸ August Strindberg, "New Directions in Art! Or the Role of Chance in Artistic Creation," trans. unknown, in Per Hedström (ed.), *Strindberg: Painter and Photographer* (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 177-8

²²⁹ Strindberg, *Samlade Verk*, vol. 65, p. 26

become bewitched. The point here is that there is no objective room independent of who is observing it. The perceiver finds it heavenly or hellish according to his state of mind. Thus perception is inescapably shaped by expectation, memory and imagination. Furthermore, as Strindberg says in "New Directions in Art," the imagination works on the unformed stuff of perception to create physical objects according to its fancy. The scene-changes in *A Dream Play* imitate this process of perception, whereby a doorkeeper's room becomes a nook for a desk and a lime tree becomes a coat stand. The metamorphosis of the mise-en-scene creates a kind of visual poetry resembling a dream.

So why does Strindberg go to the trouble of writing all this in a dream-like form in the first place? This treatment extends the dream metaphor into the physical space and scenery of the stage. But what is the dream a metaphor for? The answer is implicit in the passage from *A Blue Book* quoted above. The world appears to us via the working of the imagination. The world's consequent mutability is emphasised by some of the vocabulary used in the foreword, where Strindberg briefly describes what he means by a "dream play" (although this explanation, as we shall see, itself raises a lot of questions). The Swedish has alchemical overtones: characters "evaporate, condense, flow out."²³⁰ This is no coincidence. During his 1890s sojourn in Paris, Strindberg had set up chemical apparatus in his apartment, with which he pursued experiments in both chemistry and alchemy. Alchemy sought not only, or even primarily, the transformation of matter, but the transmutation of the soul. Thus transformation of lead into gold became for alchemy a metaphor for the sublimation of base instincts, in other words a spiritual transformation. Thus in every country where alchemy

²³⁰ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel*, p. 108

flourished, the alchemists saw themselves as inheritors of an esoteric tradition, and instruction in alchemy as an initiation.²³¹ Alchemy had, therefore, a concern with spiritual transformation not incongruent with Porphyry's allegory on the soul's descent into generation and ultimate liberation. But the part of alchemy and indeed contemporary chemistry that held a particular fascination for Strindberg was its monism. In Strindberg's own words, monism begins "from the fundamental assumption that matter is one, and the chemical elements only different stages of condensation of the same and only substance."²³² So the universe consists of one substance undergoing continual mutation and evolution, appearing under many different forms. This idea, although it has ancient roots, appealed to a number of Strindberg's contemporaries as scientifically up-to-date.²³³ Darwinian evolution did not upset the proponents of monistic chemistry, as Darwin's ideas seemed to confirm their own. Indeed, monism widened the applicability of Darwin, depicting a world where not only animals and plants but matter also evolved and changed spontaneously.²³⁴ This implied for Strindberg a kind of life-force present even in inanimate matter.²³⁵ This begins to explain the transformations of the set that Strindberg demanded. The misc-en-scene conforms to a monistic viewpoint, in which matter mutates and changes form. This implies that a fundamental unity underlies the apparent multiplicity. This in turn bears on a question that has puzzled so many directors and commentators: who is the dreamer? Before discussing this question, we must turn to one other issue raised by the staging.

²³¹ Mircea Eliade, "Alchemy" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 1, pp. 183 - 185

²³² Strindberg, *Samlade Skrifter*, vol. 54, John Landqvist (ed.) (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1920), p. 330

²³³ Brandell, *Strindberg in Inferno*, pp. 168 - 70

²³⁴ Ibid. Thus Strindberg declares at the end of his *Jardin des Plantes* "... I am a transformist like Darwin and a monist like Spencer and Haeckel." Strindberg, *Samlade Skrifter*, vol. 27, (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1917), p. 298

²³⁵ Brandell, *Strindberg in Inferno*, p. 177

Strindberg, Brecht and Platonic Theatre

Strindberg, we have seen, wrote for some years according to naturalistic principles. *A Dream Play* however continues the deliberate breaching of naturalistic principles begun in *To Damascus*. This breach of naturalism anticipates the anti-realist moves of a number of subsequent playwrights. In the last chapter I addressed the question of what kind of theatre Strindberg was attempting in *To Damascus* by a comparison with medieval mystery and morality plays. Here, I address the question again by a comparison with the theatrical practices of Bertolt Brecht. Strindberg's career ended shortly before Brecht's began, and there is at least a superficial resemblance between Strindberg's late theatre and Brecht's disruption of the realistic surface of drama. This comparison is motivated by the fact that both were rebelling against the principles of Aristotelian mimesis. Both also, in their different ways, look back to Plato.

Brecht remained throughout his career closely involved in the production of plays. His approach to producing, as well as writing, plays was governed by a theory with Marxist underpinnings. Brecht's famous 'alienation' effect aimed to keep the audience's critical faculties awake. In *A Short Organum for the Theatre*, Brecht describes the effect of naturalistic theatre on its audience as akin to hypnosis: "[t]hey look at the stage as if in a trance: an expression which comes from the Middle Ages, the days of witches and priests."²³⁶ As Peter Womack points out, in this theatre the proscenium arch acts like pane of glass through which the audience passively observes what is going on without feeling that it can in any way affect the social order

²³⁶ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 187

represented on stage.²³⁷ This kind of theatre is therefore inherently reactionary, not necessarily in its subject matter but in its manner of performance. Naturalistic theatre is, in Brecht's view, little more than childish daydreaming. It functions by creating a seamless illusion, and causing the audience to identify with characters and feel their emotions. The great enemy of Brecht's theatre is empathy. To keep the audience awake, to keep them thinking, theatre must above all break down the illusion of watching, as if through a window, scenes from real people's lives.²³⁸ It should make the familiar seem strange: the social order represented on stage must appear to be part of an ongoing historical process, not the natural and eternal order of things. In other words, it should appear mutable and the audience should feel that it can change the world.

How does Brecht do this? As Womack puts it, "[w]hat is necessary is that the *mechanics* of the thing should be visible."²³⁹ This principle affects all aspects of production, from acting to sets to music. The actors must not become totally immersed in the role, but must make the audience aware that they are playing a part, as it were demonstrating a character. As Brecht puts it, "[a]iming not to put his audience into a trance, he [the actor] must not go into a trance himself."²⁴⁰ Referring to a performance by the actor Charles Laughton, Brecht continues "the actor appears on the stage in a double role, as Laughton and as Galileo ... the showman Laughton does not disappear in the Galileo whom he is showing."²⁴¹ This is exactly the

²³⁷ Peter Womack, "Brecht: Theatre for Marx" in Anthony Frost (ed.), *Theatre Theories: From Plato to Virtual Reality* (Norwich: The Drama Studio, 2000), pp. 147-8

²³⁸ There is an ironic consonance between Brecht's ideas and Strindberg's programme for naturalistic theatre. Both wish for an audience that keeps an analytical distance from events portrayed onstage.

See pp. 70-1 above.

²³⁹ Womack, "Brecht: Theatre for Marx", p. 151 (his italics)

²⁴⁰ Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 193

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 194

opposite of the assumptions of naturalistic acting, where the aim is precisely to make the audience empathise with the characters and spend a few hours dreaming. The purpose of method acting is to disappear into the role as entirely as possible.

The resemblance between Brecht's conception of naturalistic theatre and Plato's myth of the cave is clear. A bourgeois audience sits in the dark looking at unreal events acted out by people pretending to be someone else, and take it for reality. The audience deliberately suppresses its awareness of the unreality of what they see. In Plato's myth, the wise man undoes his bonds and turns towards the entrance of the cave, seeing reality for the first time. Consequently, he also sees the shadow play, the thing he had taken for the world, for what it is. Brecht's theatre similarly aims to awaken its audience, and to re-orient it towards what Brecht conceives as the truth. This motivates the breaking up of the mimetic surface of the play.

A Dream Play similarly undermines the mimetic assumptions of Aristotelian theatre by the mutation of scenery, the jumps in time and place. Strindberg's use of music and song also, perhaps, anticipates Brecht. For Brecht, music should resist smooth incorporation: the actors, when they sing, should mark it off from the rest of the play, the effect perhaps heightened by a change in the lighting.²⁴² In *A Dream Play*, the Officer enters singing Victoria's name:

Officer (sings): Victoria!

A Female Voice (from above, sings): I am here!²⁴³

The scene as a whole expresses a state of unfulfilled longing in an almost Beckett-like way – the Officer returns again and again, singing for Victoria, whom he never sees.

²⁴² Ibid., p. 203

²⁴³ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel*, p. 121

In this sense the scene itself is not mimetic, but within the scene the sung lines lend themselves to further breaking up the surface of the play.

Brecht's treatment of character offers a further point of comparison with Strindberg. Just as the social order is to be seen in Brecht, not as an eternal fact, but as a contingent result of history, so character too is historically conditioned. A character will behave according to class interest and to circumstances.²⁴⁴ Subjectivity does not stand above or outside history but is part of it and conditioned by it. It was here that Brecht intersected with Buddhism, in the denial of an essential, substantial self.²⁴⁵ Brecht's main concern in characterisation was that the actor should not disappear into the part: Laughton should not disappear into Galileo but should still be visible 'underneath' his role. But for Strindberg Laughton too is a kind of role. As we will see in the next chapter, Strindberg treats character as persona - a mask - leaving open the question of whether any stable essence underlies it. Because of this, it becomes difficult to speak of anyone as having a good character or a bad character. Character becomes reactive and dependent on context. As in Brecht, character is conditioned. Even in his naturalistic plays, Strindberg conceived of character as something patched together out of fragments.²⁴⁶ For Brecht too, character is a 'complex', a mixture of sometimes contradictory parts and attitudes, and of course it is historically conditioned. Brecht claimed his inconsistent characterisation was not just intended to provoke alienation, it was also more true to life. Strindberg had already made similar claims.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁴ Brecht, *Brecht on Brecht*, p. 191

²⁴⁵ Antony Tatlow, "Saying Yes and Saying No: Schopenhauer and Nietzsche as Educators" in Tatlow, Antony (ed.), *The Brecht Yearbook*, vol. 27 (Madison, Michigan: International Brecht Society, 2002), pp. 23-4, 38

²⁴⁶ Strindberg, *Miss Julie and Other Plays*, p. 60

²⁴⁷ Strindberg, *Samlade Verk*, vol. 64, pp. 68, 69-70

I have drawn a parallel here between the theoretical treatment of staging and characterisation behind Brecht's "Verfremdungseffekt" and the more ad hoc stage technique Strindberg uses in *A Dream Play*. Does *A Dream Play* in fact, then, create the kind of alienation Brecht sought?²⁴⁸ *A Dream Play* flaunts its own status as a waking dream, even in its title. Yet its aim is different. Brechtian theatre aims to awaken its audience to relationships of power and their consequences, with the ultimate hope of altering those relationships. To achieve this it tries to keep its audience's critical faculties alert by playing on the doubleness of theatre: Charles Laughton is both the actor Charles Laughton and Galileo. However, Brecht accepts the reality of the world interpreted by Marx. This forms the ultimate backdrop to Brecht's thinking. *A Dream Play* makes this backdrop of power relations, and the world in which they appear, into a dream. The auditors of Plato's myth find in the cave's inhabitants an image of themselves, and yet the myth is itself a part of the world's shadow-play. This doubleness in the myth of the cave, as Anthony Gash has pointed out, serves very well as an image of theatre.²⁴⁹ In the theatre the stage is both a stage and it is somewhere else, just as each character is both an actor and somebody else. Aristotelian theatre suppresses this doubleness, while Platonic theatre plays on it.

The dialogue of *A Dream Play* evokes exactly this doubleness in the Daughter's lines towards the end of the play:

²⁴⁸ A recent production at Sweden's Royal Dramatic Theatre (directed by Mats Ek) also suggested, in one small aspect of the staging, that the play could work in a Brechtian manner. The Daughter and the Glazier, in their first scene, gaze out at the audience as they talk about all the flowers they can see, and the Glazier explains that they wish to grow away from the dirt. Here, the audience itself registered as the flowers. This brought strongly to awareness the *theatricality* of what was going on. This was one of the few good moments in this production.

²⁴⁹ Anthony Gash, "Plato's Theatre of the Mind" in Frost, *Theatre Theories*, pp. 10-11

In the morning of time before the sun shone, Brahma, the divine primordial force, allowed himself to be seduced by Maya, the world-mother, into propagating. This [...] was heaven's original sin. And so the world, this life and its people are only a phantom, a semblance, a dream-picture...²⁵⁰

The Poet (the Daughter's interlocutor) as well as the audience find here an image of their own predicament.²⁵¹ They are all, according to this, phantoms – yet this speech is itself also Maya. We have looked in some detail at the relationship between Strindberg's 'cave' paintings and *A Dream Play*, and noted that under Swedenborg's influence Strindberg came to regard images as a more direct means of communication than words. In the passage above, Strindberg reverts to myth, as in fact Plato sometimes did, to communicate in a manner inaccessible to discursive explanations.

The passage above functions in an analogous way to Plato's myth of the cave. It depicts in mythic terms the ontological and existential situation of humanity. Yet, like Plato's myth, it is itself an image within the world's unreal play. Implicitly, then, an image, even though itself a shadow, has the potential to change the spectator's orientation. Strindberg, unlike Brecht, was no longer writing according to a coherent theory of stagecraft, but the above analysis reveals that *A Dream Play* does in fact contain an underlying coherence. The staging, the use of images, the dialogue and the Daughter's mythical descent into the world all work together. This theatre works, as it were, towards a metaphysical *Verfremdungseffekt*.

²⁵⁰ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel*, p. 194

²⁵¹ The scholarly consensus holds that because the first part of this speech was inserted late, and consists of a paraphrase from Arvid Ahnfelts *Verdslitteraturens historia*, it must be an inessential afterthought. (See Strindberg, *Samlade Verk*, vol. 46 pp. 135-6) Strindberg scholar Harry Carlson disagrees, seeing the concept of maya, and therefore this speech also, as integral to the play. My argument suggests that Carlson is right. I see no reason not to believe that Strindberg inserted this speech precisely because it states in mythical form the fundamental idea behind *A Dream Play*.

I have argued here that *A Dream Play* can be read as one possible form of Platonic theatre. Brecht represents another form that a Platonic theatre might take. Harry Carlson remarks that Strindberg was "a Platonist in his heart and an Aristotelian in his head."²⁵² This is an astute comment. As we will see in the following section, on "Dream," Strindberg's idealism did not overcome his scepticism. *A Dream Play* remains rooted in hard and often harsh experience. The 'mythical' aspect of the play exists in tension with this, as I discuss below.

There is first, however, one further question to address.

3. DREAM

The Question of the Dreamer

Is the dreamer Agnes herself? One of the male characters? Ingmar Bergman's 1970 production placed the Poet to one side, observing most of the action and thus making him the dreamer. The American Strindberg scholar Harry Carlson, on the other hand, proposes a rather elaborate sequence of shared dreams between Agnes and the three main male protagonists.²⁵³ This imposes some clarity, but raises the question whether such clarity is spurious. In Carlson's case, it leads him to favour what is fundamentally a moralistic reading of the play.²⁵⁴ Director Katie Mitchell's recent production at the National Theatre came up with a radical solution. She invented a character, Alfred²⁵⁵, and introduced a framing device in which Alfred falls asleep in his office and then becomes the unfortunate protagonist of all the dreams that follow.

²⁵² Carlson, *Out of Inferno*, p 54

²⁵³ Harry G. Carlson, *Strindberg and the Poetry of Myth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 144 - 5

²⁵⁴ See, for example, his comments on the Officer's failure to pass the 'tests' the Daughter (in Carlson's interpretation) confronts him with. *Ibid.*, pp. 162 - 3.

²⁵⁵ Although the Daughter in one scene addresses the Lawyer as 'Alfred,' there is no character analogous to the one Mitchell invented. This is, essentially, an entirely new character.

In Mitchell's version Agnes is reduced to a minor character in Alfred's dream. None of these answers are very satisfactory, in my view. Carlson's interpretation favours a schematic, allegorical interpretation of the play at the expense of the elements that undermine allegories and schemas. On the other hand, both Mitchell's and Bergman's solutions involve major directorial interventions in the play, particularly Mitchell's.²⁵⁶ My contention is that if we read the play while bearing in mind Strindberg's monism, these interventions become unnecessary and indeed problematic. At this point I want to pick out some remarks that Katie Mitchell made, because I believe she expresses clearly a basic misconception.²⁵⁷ Strindberg's foreword states: "one consciousness stands over all, the dreamer's."²⁵⁸ Glossing this, Mitchell says "*A Dream Play* is a series of episodes in one long dream that, as Strindberg's preface states, all take place inside one person's consciousness." Now let's take a look at what Strindberg actually says about the dreamer at slightly greater length:

...But one consciousness stands over all, the dreamer's; for it there are no secrets, nothing insignificant, no scruples, no law. He neither condemns nor acquits, but only relates; and as the dream is for the most part painful, less often happy, a tone of sadness and compassion for all that lives runs through the swaying narrative.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁶ It is of course true that a production must interpret the play. My argument here is that these productions have interpreted this aspect of the play badly. This applies more strongly to the Bergman production, as Mitchell was in effect using *A Dream Play* as a springboard to arrive at a play of her own.

²⁵⁷ Katie Mitchell, "No Limits", in *The Guardian*, February 12th, 2005. The article is online at <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/features/story/0,,1411035,00.html>. It is probably unfair to pick on Mitchell here: she did produce a lively piece of theatre. *A Dream Play* is a problematic piece in terms of stage production, and not merely from the technical point of view as the ambiguity over this issue demonstrates.

²⁵⁸ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel*, p. 108. In Swedish, "ett medvetande står över alla, det är drömmarens."

²⁵⁹ In Swedish: "Men ett medvetande står över alla, det är drömmarens; för det finns inga hemligheter, ingen inkonsekvens, inga skrupler, ingen lag. Han dömer icke, frisäger icke, endast relaterar; och

The dreamer seems in this description markedly impersonal. Strindberg never tells us who the dreamer is, nor does the drama imply that it is any one character or any set of characters. Furthermore, Strindberg does not say that one person's consciousness stands over all, only that one consciousness does. I do not believe this was due to oversight. It seems to me there were a number of things in the back of Strindberg's mind when he conceived of a drama of this kind, among them his earlier adherence to monism and Schopenhauer, especially in the latter's conception of the will. I have already alluded to Strindberg's monism. Its basic tenet is that despite the appearance of multiplicity, the universe is essentially one substance. For Strindberg, this also, we have seen, implied mutability – a single substance evolving and changing appearance. For this reason he expended a lot of energy trying to undermine the elemental theory of chemistry.²⁶⁰ Now although Strindberg later rejected monism for theism, monism clearly retained a strong grip on his imagination. Turning to Schopenhauer,²⁶¹ you cannot read him very far without seeing his affinity with Strindberg's outlook. They not only share each other's misogyny, but also a profound pessimism. Again, both took an interest in Buddhism and the East. Strindberg actually says in one of his letters "... I have grown up on three Buddhists: Schopenhauer, v. Hartmann and lastly Nietzsche."²⁶² Schopenhauer opens *The World as Will and Idea* with the assertion "The world is my idea." That is to say that the world exists for us only as we perceive

såsom drömmen mest är smärtsam, mindre ofta gläddig, går en ton av vemod, och medlidande med allt levande genom den vinglande berättelsen." Strindberg, Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel, p. 108

²⁶⁰ Brandell disparages Strindberg's pursuit of monistic chemistry, and indeed his scientific beliefs in general. In Strindberg's defence, I would note that although the exact form and details of the monism Strindberg espoused will now seem absurd to many, monism in a broad sense is not dead. Physicists spent much of the twentieth century looking for a unified field theory, a theory of everything – a quest for a monistic view of the universe if ever there was one. In some cases this quest took on a religious dimension. It led Professor Brian Josephson of Cambridge University, a Nobel Laureate in Physics, into Mahayana Buddhism, and led to David Bohm's well-known association with J. Krishnamurti. On the other hand Dr. Susan Blackmore, the psychologist, explicitly calls herself a monist and defends it as part of her materialist scientific orthodoxy.

²⁶¹ This section is necessarily cursory – a detailed account of Schopenhauer's influence on Strindberg is beyond my scope here. I only wish to point out some of the striking similarities, which result not only from Strindberg's reading of Schopenhauer but also from a similarity of temperament.

²⁶² *Brev*, vol. 11, p. 99

it, and we have no access to the world apart from perception; it is idea or representation. Schopenhauer also accepted Kant's position that space and time are categories of perception, not properties of the world in itself. In other words we do not derive the concepts of space and time empirically from experience, but rather impose these categories on the flux of sensory perceptions. We are unable to experience the world apart from these categories: they are a priori concepts. If we take these two together, that the world is perception, and that the subject imposes space, time and causation on the flux of experience, then the world might begin to seem a little unreal. Schopenhauer clearly thought so, for he states that the world as idea "could only pass by us like an insubstantial dream or a ghostly vision."²⁶³ The other aspect of Schopenhauer's philosophy is the world as will. Now the will for Schopenhauer is not just the underpinning of human consciousness, but the metaphysical underpinning of the world. Schopenhauer argues that the body is the only thing anyone knows as both idea and will. To paraphrase his argument, I know it as idea because it is part of my perceptual field. However I also know it as it is in itself, from the inside. And when I examine my body under the aspect of thing-in-itself, I find that the thing-in-itself is will.²⁶⁴ The unconscious, ever-desiring will as thing-in-itself underpins everything, and thus the world is objectified will. Schopenhauer states time and again that there is only one will, appearing under different forms. In one passage, for instance, he tells us:

This will ... [the reader] will recognise as the inmost nature not only in those phenomena which are closely similar to his own, in men and animals, but further reflection will lead him also to recognise the force which stirs and

²⁶³ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. Jill Berman (London: Everyman, 2002), p. 31.

²⁶⁴ The psychological implications of Schopenhauer's work were not lost on Freud, and perhaps not on Strindberg either. For more details, see R.K. Gupta, "Freud and Schopenhauer," in Michael Fox (ed.), *Schopenhauer: His Philosophical Achievement*, (Brighton: Harvester, 1980).

vegetates in the plant, and indeed the force by which the crystal is formed, that by which the magnet turns to the North Pole ... the force which appears in the elective affinities of matter as repulsion and attraction, separation and combination, and, lastly, even gravitation ... all these he will recognise as different only in their phenomenal existence, but in their inner nature as identical.²⁶⁵

Schopenhauer advocates, in other words, a form of monism. Significantly, Schopenhauer also has a soteriology. Human beings are individuated will, and are also endowed with consciousness. For Schopenhauer the only permanent escape from suffering, engendered in large part by the never-satisfied desires and promptings of the will, is a conscious denial of the will and stilling of desire. Given Strindberg's religious turn later in life, and Schopenhauer's concurrence with Christian morality on the evil of the will, this must have appealed to Strindberg strongly.²⁶⁶ To sum up, Schopenhauer's conception of the world makes of it a sort of dream emanating from the will, in which individual human identities are part of the dream. Or, as David Berman glosses this latter point: "The world, in short, will be like a very orderly and vivid dream, although not one in which I (David Berman) am the dreamer but only one of the characters in the dream."²⁶⁷ In terms of *A Dream Play*, no individual character is the dreamer. The dreamer only witnesses, but takes no part in the play: it is absent. How do we read this absence? Is it a theological absence? I return to the question, below, when an empty space intrudes at a crucial point in the play.

²⁶⁵ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, p. 42.

²⁶⁶ Frederick Copleston notes the ironic consonance between Schopenhauer's morality and contemporary Christian ethics. Nietzsche also came to this conclusion, and because of this came to reject Schopenhauer. See Copleston, "Schopenhauer and Nietzsche" in Michael Fox (ed.), *Schopenhauer: His Philosophical Achievement*, (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), pp. 215 – 225.

²⁶⁷ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, p. xxv

The Challenge to Theodicy

A Dream Play owes much of its dramatic force to the very human conflicts that take place within it. Woven into its dream-structure is a lot of hard life-experience. Indeed, it is seldom far from the mundane realities of this-worldly existence. Sometimes the play compresses this experience to the point that it becomes parabolic. Thus the Bill Poster enters proudly bearing a fishing net and a green fish-box:

Daughter: And it makes you happy?

Bill Poster: Yes, so happy ... It was my dream as a child ... and finally it's come true, though I am fifty years old, of course...

Daughter: Fifty years for a fishing net and a box...

Bill Poster: A green box, a green one...²⁶⁸

Having finally realized his dream, however, the Bill Poster finds his net and box strangely disappointing:

Daughter: What was wrong with your net?

Bill Poster: Wrong? Well, there wasn't really anything wrong... but it wasn't the way I'd imagined it, and so the happiness wasn't *so* great...²⁶⁹

The Bill Poster cannot exactly say how he had imagined his net, so the Daughter says "Let me tell you!... You had imagined it differently! It was going to be green, but not *that* green!"²⁷⁰ This scene compactly (and rather humorously) encapsulates a common experience: that something longed for, when attained, does not supply the expected sense of fulfilment. When we obtain a desired object, our desire fixes on something else. Desire itself never ends. This suggests a Schopenhauerian, and indeed Buddhist, sense that dissatisfaction is inherent to living. However, the play

²⁶⁸ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel*, p. 120

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 127

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 127-8

contains also an outright attack on theodicy, that is the attempt to reconcile the goodness of God with the existence of suffering.

The play becomes more literally parabolic in its attack on the parable of the prodigal son. Strindberg replaces the two sons with two daughters. While the family has a party for the daughter who went astray the other daughter, Lina, downtrodden and embittered, has to feed the pigs. The Daughter gives the usual explanation of the parable: "They are rejoicing because the one who went astray abandoned the path of wickedness, and not just because she came home!"²⁷¹ The Poet, however, points out how unjust this is: "Then they should put on a ball with supper every evening for this blameless working-girl who never went astray ... They never do though. And when Lina isn't working she must go to church where they reproach her for not being perfect. Is that just?"²⁷² Far from justifying the ways of God to man, the play cross-questions divine justice. The attack on theodicy exists in tension with the overall mythic motif of the play. Gratuitous suffering does not sit easily with cosmic order. The Myth of Er at the end of Plato's Republic, to name just one example, defends the essential justness of the world. In a dream, Er sees the souls of the dead being judged and sent down to infernal regions to undergo purgative suffering, or up to a heavenly realm where they reap the reward of a good life. When their portion of suffering or pleasure is exhausted, they each pick a life and are reborn. According to this vision, no one suffers unjustly. Our own choices determine our happiness or misery.

The play's attack on theodicy brings to mind the statement of the theologian David Jenkins: "The dreadful thing about so much theology is that in relation to the reality

²⁷¹ Ibid., p. 151

²⁷² Ibid., pp. 151-2

of the human situation, it is so superficial ... Theologians need therefore to stand under the judgments of the insights of literature before they can speak with true theological force of, and to, the world this literature reflects and illuminates."²⁷³ The Daughter does not come to judge humanity, but to take on human suffering and, as she tells Indra in the prologue, see if their complaints are justified. In a sense, the play judges the gods, or indeed God. Despite her platitudes at the beginning of the play, the Daughter confronts dirt and suffering and vice at every turn. She tells the Officer, for instance, that he too is a child of heaven. The Officer replies "Then why do I have look after horses? Clean stalls and muck them out?"²⁷⁴ This juxtaposition of idealistic sentiments and earthly filth recurs in a number of places, and in a fairly literal way in one of the Poet's scenes. He enters carrying a bucket of mud, and switches from ecstatic utterances to cynicism:

(*ecstatic*) From clay the god Ptah created human beings on a potter's wheel, a lathe, - (*sceptical*) or some damn thing or other!... (*ecstatic*) From clay the sculptor creates his more or less immortal masterpiece, - (*sceptical*) -- which is usually just rubbish!²⁷⁵

This happens again in the Daughter's statement to the Officer that "love conquers all."²⁷⁶ The corridor scene follows soon afterwards, where the Officer wears out his life waiting for his true love, Victoria. This trite statement of the Daughter's is undercut further by her own marriage to the Lawyer a little later, in which they find they cannot help torturing each other. At the beginning of the play, the Glasscutter

²⁷³ David Jenkins, "Literature and the Theologian," in John Coulson (ed.), *Theology and the University: An Ecumenical Investigation* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964), p. 219

²⁷⁴ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel*, p. 115

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 150

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 119

tells the Daughter that flowers grow up out of the soil “[b]ecause they cannot feel at home in the dirt.”²⁷⁷ The rest of the play consists largely of dirt and suffering.

The question of justice arises most acutely in the coal-heavers’ scene. The Daughter, finding herself in a Mediterranean scene, declares “This is paradise!”²⁷⁸ The First Coal-Heaver answers “This is hell!”

2nd Coal-Heaver: Forty-eight degrees in the shade!

1st Coal-Heaver: Shall we go for a swim?

2nd Coal-Heaver: Then the police will come! We aren’t allowed to swim here!

1st Coal-Heaver: Can’t we even take fruit from the tree?

2nd Coal-Heaver: No, the police will come.

1st Coal-Heaver: But I can’t work in this heat; I’m going.

2nd Coal-Heaver: The police will come and arrest you! ... And anyway then you’ll have to go without food.²⁷⁹

The coal-heavers confront the Daughter directly with the injustice of their lot. As the first coal-heaver points out, those who work hardest eat least. He adds “[s]houldn’t one – without wanting to be blunt – perhaps suppose that this is unjust? ... What does the daughter of the Gods say?” The daughter of the Gods is speechless. None of the usual platitudes can adequately explain this injustice. The coal-heavers have committed no crime except for being born poor, while the rich have no special virtue to explain their fortune. On top of this, earth, air and water are all owned by someone. The Daughter asks if there might not be some secret justification for the

²⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 113

²⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 168

²⁷⁹ Ibid., pp. 168-9

way things are, to which the Lawyer replies "Yes, the well-off always think so."²⁸⁰ He concludes "That everyone cannot be equal, that I can understand, but that they should be so unequal?"²⁸¹ Strindberg attacks not only social injustice in this scene, but the claims made by theodicy also. He confronts suffering and can find no explanation consonant with divine justice. The attempt to explain, or explain away, suffering fails. Indeed, the coal-heavers' scene indicts religiously-motivated explanations of apparent injustice. It points out how well such explanations suit the well-off and the "right-thinking" people. If theology stands under the judgment of literature here, it does not come out too well. Strindberg abjures in this play the platitudes with which he resolved *To Damascus*.

Brecht again echoes Strindberg, in his *The Good Person of Szechwan*. The whole play is, in effect, a parable, and it attacks the moral underpinnings of monotheism (that is, morality conceived as obedience to a set of divine commandments). The eponymous good person, Shen Teh, begins the play as a prostitute. This itself may signal unease with a moral code that all too easily condemns prostitutes as fallen women. Three gods seek lodging in the capital of Szechwan in their quest to find at least one good person in the province. The only good person they can find is Shen Teh, the prostitute. In return for their night's lodging, the gods reward Shen Teh with a large sum of money and the instruction to be good. Shen Teh has already explained how difficult it is to follow this apparently simple instruction:

Of course I should like to obey the commandments [...] Not to covet my neighbour's house would be a joy to me [...] nor do I wish to exploit other

²⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 170

²⁸¹ Ibid., p. 171

men or to rob the defenceless. But how can it be done? Even by breaking one or two of the commandments I can barely manage.²⁸²

With the money she has received from the gods, Shen Teh buys a tobacco shop and goes into business. In accordance with her own inclinations, as well as the commandment of the gods, she tries to help all who come to her. As a result of her kindness, she becomes terribly exploited until her business is in danger of folding. Shen Teh's cousin, a young man called Shui Ta, comes to take over the shop while Shen Teh disappears. A hard-headed businessman, he drives out the people who have been living off his cousin and turns the shop into a profitable business. Having restored the shop's fortunes, he departs. He finds however that he must intermittently return when the shop is again in danger due to Shen Teh's charity. Finally, he appears to have returned for good, while Shen Teh has vanished, and the suspicion grows in the town that Shui Ta has murdered Shen Teh. The final scene, in which Shui Ta is put on trial, reveals that Shen Teh and Shui Ta are the same person. Shen Teh could not follow the commandments and make a living. To survive, she must split herself in two.

The Good Person of Szechwan echoes *A Dream Play* not only in this parabolic attack on a morality made impossible because it conflicts with the need to survive, but even in the tone of some of the comments about the difficulty of existing in this kind of world. The First God exclaims at one point

We for our part wish to travel further and continue our search, and discover still more people like our good person in Szechwan, so that we can put a stop

²⁸² Bertolt Brecht, *The Good Person of Szechwan*, trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 2000), pp. 10-11

to the rumour which says that the good have found our earth impossible to live on.²⁸³

The latter part of this could have come straight out of *A Dream Play*. The main complaint throughout is that in the world it is impossible to exist except by exploiting others. For Brecht, this is the consequence of a corrupt politics and an economy based upon exploitation. Thus Shui Ta sings

In order to win one's mid-day meal
 One needs the toughness that elsewhere builds empires.
 Except twelve others be trampled down
 The unfortunate cannot be helped.
 So why can't the gods make a simple decision
 That goodness must conquer in spite of its weakness?—
 Then back up the good with an armoured division
 Command it to 'fire!' and not tolerate meekness?²⁸⁴

The good are weak and therefore ineffectual unless prepared to back their principles with force. Note that in the passage above, Brecht disparages meekness. Clearly, in Brecht's view, the meek will not inherit the earth until they take to the barricades. This morality only serves, in this view, to ensure that the poor and the powerless remain poor and powerless. This is where *Good Woman* and *A Dream Play* diverge. While Strindberg shares Brecht's perception that life is intolerably difficult, and while he too attacks a hypocritical morality, he does not see the root of these only in economic or political conditions. Ameliorating the material circumstances of the poor still, nevertheless, leaves them and everyone else in the position of having to harm others in order to live. The cause seems to coincide with the creation of the earth

²⁸³ Ibid., p. 22

²⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 48-9

itself, in some form of original sin, or a falling away from an original harmony.

While this has Christian overtones, it also comes close to the Buddhist analysis of suffering. The first of the Four Holy Truths taught by the Buddha is that birth, ageing, sickness and death are all *dukkha*. *Dukkha* signifies something broader than suffering; it refers to a general sense of dissatisfaction and unease in mundane living.²⁸⁵ Thus the Bill-Poster who has waited all his life for a green fishing net finds that the fulfilment of his desire gives way to dissatisfaction. Desire and attachment to the world lie at the root of suffering and there is nobody who does not suffer.²⁸⁶

Strindberg referred to *To Damascus* as his first dream play. *A Dream Play* is better drama than *To Damascus* because the conflicts such as those discussed above are not governed by a preconceived allegorical pattern, nor are they resolved. The director Stanislavski demanded that his actors find the truth inside their performance. As a playwright, Strindberg comes much closer to the truth of experience here than in his earlier dream play. The depiction of marriage, to take one example, remains fresh and compelling, as well as blackly humorous. Rather than opting for any particular answer to the problem of suffering, it leaves the audience with a question-mark. In this sense too, to draw one final comparison with Brecht, it resembles *The Good Person of Szechwan*. The latter ends with an epilogue in which one of the players apologises to the audience for the lack of a neat conclusion, then poses some questions:

²⁸⁵ I rely here on the account in Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 47-60.

²⁸⁶ *A Dream Play* provides further examples of this. In the Skamsund scene, the rich are stretched out on racks and undergo treatments for their health that resemble torture. While this scene has a strongly satirical element, it does nevertheless point out that beyond meeting material needs wealth does not relieve all suffering.

The apparent pessimism of the Buddhist stance is relieved by the fact that Buddhism, like Christianity, has a soteriology – one that depends on a realistic assessment of mundane life. Whether and in what form *A Dream Play* allows a soteriological promise is discussed towards the end of this chapter.

But what would you suggest? What is your answer? [...]

Should men be better? Should the world be changed?

Or just the gods? Or ought there to be none?²⁸⁷

The Good Person of Szechwan is thus open-ended. It asks the audience to reflect on the experience lying behind the play and make up their own minds. *A Dream Play* is not open-ended in quite this way, yet it places mundane suffering side-by-side with a myth of incarnation and liberation and refuses to resolve the tension on the audience's behalf. What the *theological* implications of this tension might be, I explore next.

The abyss

So, we have a play where the dreamer is absent, and despite its dream-like appearance and the often parabolic nature of the narrative, resists easy allegorisation. The play contains a tension between the language of presence and the language of absence. Returning to the cave allegory, this time in a more purely Platonic form, the Daughter tells the Lawyer that in a mirror you see the world the right way around, "because as it is it's the wrong way round."

Lawyer: How did it come to be the wrong way round?

Daughter: When the copy was taken...

Lawyer: Exactly! The copy ... I always had a feeling it was a faulty copy...²⁸⁸

Plato's myth uses the language of presence and being. The images in the cave correspond to the Ideas that those who escape the cave perceive. For Plato the Idea or Form is real in a way that the image is not, but the image nevertheless shares

²⁸⁷ Brecht, *The Good Person of Szechwan*, p. 109

²⁸⁸ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus/Ett Drömspel*, p. 136

something of the qualities of the Idea.²⁸⁹ Here the myth of the cave has become problematic, as we have seen – this world is not only a copy, but it has something wrong with it. Something has interposed or gone wrong between the original and the copy, and the original, true world has become distant, almost an absence. This tension occurs again in the unanswered appeals to God, an appeal that the Daughter, finally, says she will carry to the throne. “The throne” is the language of presence, and the language of a personal God, yet the unanswered appeals indicate only an absence, all the more so as in the course of the play an answer never comes. This in part is what makes the ending so moving: perhaps the throne is empty.

This emptiness threatens to open an abyss. Indeed, the abyss is felt, and suppressed, throughout the play, hidden behind a clover-leaf door. This door remains throughout most of the scene-changes, gradually becoming the focus of the whole play, and it provokes notably hostile reactions. The Officer is the first to speculate on what it hides, noting, as a variety of characters do, that they have never seen it opened, even though they have passed it thousands of times. An excited crowd gathers as the Glazier prepares to open the door, when a policeman intervenes, forbidding anyone to open the door “in the name of the law.”²⁹⁰ The secular authorities do not want the door opened, but as we learn the door also contains a threat to the prevailing religious order. Here it is not just the secular authority represented in the police that wishes to prevent the opening of the clover-leaf door, it is authority as such that is threatened by

²⁸⁹ See, for example, Diotima's reported speech on beauty in the Symposium. “Suddenly he [the seeker of wisdom] will behold ... that very Beauty, Socrates, for which all the earlier hardships had been borne: in the first place, everlasting, and never being born nor perishing, neither increasing nor diminishing ... while all the beautiful things elsewhere partake of this beauty in such manner that when they are born and perish it becomes neither less nor more and nothing at all happens to it.” Plato, “Symposium,” in Plato, *Great Dialogues of Plato*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse (New York: Mentor, 1984), p. 105

²⁹⁰ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel*, p. 130

it. As the feminist theologian Grace M. Jantzen has noted, the abyss in modernity has taken on an altogether negative connotation. As a negation of all grounds, it threatens to undermine all certainty, and with it any ontological foundation for truth.²⁹¹ It therefore provokes horror and dread. *A Dream Play* harnesses the destructive potential of the abyss, for authority implies an Author and the abyss hidden behind the door seems to threaten the whole edifice of authority guaranteed ultimately by a law-giving personal God. In *A Dream Play* too this provokes horror. Thus the Lawyer reacts with terror and dismay when the Daughter fiddles with his clover-leaf cupboard. Indeed, the door provokes a sense of excitement and unease amongst everyone. The Dean of Theology declares that the door hides dangerous truths.²⁹² He and the other three Deans, of Philosophy, Medicine and Law, wrangle and fight each other over the truth and who has it. In the end, though, they all stand for a social institution that claims to know the truth, and that feels its authority threatened. When the door opens, and they find that it contains nothing, they are scandalized as the Dean of Theology declares, "Nothing! That is the solution to the riddle of the world..."²⁹³ The Dean of Law declares that they have been deceived, and the crowd of "right-thinking people" close in threateningly on the Daughter.

Lord Chancellor: Would you please tell us what you mean by opening this door?

Daughter: No, my friends! If I told you, you wouldn't believe me.

Dean of Medicine: But it's nothing.

Daughter: Exactly. – But you don't understand!²⁹⁴

²⁹¹ Grace M. Jantzen, "Eros and the Abyss: Reading Medieval Mystics in Postmodernity" in *Literature and Theology*, vol. 17, No. 3, pp. 224 – 264.

²⁹² Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel*, p. 185

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 189

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Thus the Daughter reveals an emptiness that precisely threatens to "swallow[] up foundations and grounds for certainty."²⁹⁵ It fills the Deans with nihilistic dread. And yet the Daughter, in revealing the nothing hidden behind the door, acts as a hierophant, the revealer of a sacred mystery. This is all the more curious given Strindberg's reputation for misogyny. It takes a *daughter* of the gods to reveal a holy abyss. Jantzen points out that the Greek root word for abyss is feminine.²⁹⁶ She also points out that its association with the feminine has persisted in the imagination of modernity, not least in Nietzsche and Heidegger. It persists here too, but here it is valorized because it brings freedom. Thus, *A Dream Play* agrees in part with the negative assessment of the abyss as destructive, but here, its groundlessness threatening subversion, the abyss also seems to promise freedom.

What does this signify for the role of the Daughter, a female Christ? The play suggests in a number of places that we read her as such. She acts as an intercessor between humanity and God, and indeed her fate seems pre-figured in that of Jesus, the saviour destroyed by the "right-thinking people." Indeed, there may be a reference to agnus dei, the sacrificial lamb of God, in her name, Agnes.²⁹⁷ But she undermines the foundations of a metaphysical theology. In this, like Falander in *The Red Room* or the Unknown in his unregenerate state in *To Damascus*, she resembles Dostoyevsky's version of Christ. She offers a freedom at odds with the Church. Thus the Dean of Theology, confronted by the emptiness she reveals, becomes an atheist and apostate. For him, a religion without a metaphysical foundation is impossible. The revelation of the abyss is the death of God. Is religion still possible after the death of God?

²⁹⁵ Jantzen, "Eros and the Abyss," p. 245

²⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 251

²⁹⁷ Ejnar Thomsen, "Bidrag till Tolkningen af 'Ett Drömspel'" in *Orbis Litterarum*, vol. 1, 1943, pp. 87-8.

Only, Jantzen suggests, by re-imagining the abyss. To do this, she suggests, we should turn back to medieval mysticism, which characterized the abyss in feminine terms, as a womb. This dilemma – how to do theology after the death of God – has motivated all the theologies that start from “half-belief.” For Strindberg, the revelation of the divine void is the death of all systems. The import is apocalyptic – as the ending of the play makes clear – but, in this case, not necessarily a matter for despair.

The Daughter’s hieratic revelation of the void is followed by a funereal ritual. The characters file past a funeral pyre and cast in the markers of their identity and of their folly. The Doorkeeper throws her shawl, that has absorbed the suffering of so many, into the flames. The Officer burns up his roses, the Glazier throws in his diamond, and so forth. At the end the Dean of Theology comes in raging, and cries

I have been disavowed by God, persecuted by the people, abandoned by the government and mocked by my colleagues. How can I believe when no-one else believes ... How can I defend a God who doesn’t defend his own? It’s all rubbish.²⁹⁸

So saying, he casts a book (a martyrology, according to the Poet) on the fire. For him the emptiness behind the door has left a nihilistic absence, and the fire is a funeral pyre for his religion and his God. Consigning his book to the flames, he also casts away theology as a closed and all-inclusive metaphysical system. For the Dean of Theology, this means abandoning his God. So at the height of this ritual comes a statement of atheism. The words of the book are silent.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 197

Conclusion

Plato at crucial moments gives up arguing and resorts to myth. His myths convey a vision of an ordered, just cosmos.²⁹⁹ Strindberg also employs a cosmic myth, but here combined with a Gnostic sense of a fallen world, he calls the justice and harmony of the cosmos into question. I pointed out, above, *A Dream Play*'s resemblance to Hopkins' chromatic harmony. Hopkins preferred diatonic harmony because it allowed for order imposed from above, while chromatic harmony did not. An order imposed on the world from outside also allows, perhaps demands, theism. Chromatism excludes the kind of God Hopkins wants. If the dreamlike aspect of the play makes theism problematic, what does it do to Christ? The Lawyer at one point tells the Daughter that a liberator once came, and he was crucified by all the "right-thinking people."³⁰⁰ This remark, almost an aside, makes the crucifixion seem not so much the central cosmic event of Christian theology but a contingent outcome of malice. Furthermore, in the Fingal's Cave scene, the Daughter and the Poet witness a saviour walking on water towards the foundering ship, and the crew leap into the sea to escape him. These imply that Christ failed – that the crucifixion did not redeem humanity. More radically, if the crucifixion is merely contingent, it undermines the whole edifice of redemptive theology. And without the resurrection, all we have is the crucifixion. The empty tomb, instead of signifying resurrection, signifies a void. While this may be a divine void, it undermines God as presence.

²⁹⁹ The Myth of Er in the final chapter of *The Republic*, again, makes this explicit. The myth explicitly defends the justness of the cosmos, but this sense of cosmic justice and order underlies and underpins all Platonic myth-making. The word cosmos itself implies order, and therefore balance and justice. Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Francis MacDonald Cornford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 350 - 359

³⁰⁰ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel*, pp. 167-8

The conclusion of *A Dream Play* thus negates theology and negates the theologian's God. Does this make the play, in fact, atheist? This is a difficult question to answer, because in *A Dream Play*, as in the other plays I discuss, the categories of Christian and atheist become problematic. Neither label can be applied unequivocally. The play reflects what the theologian Thomas Altizer described nearly seventy years later as the chaotic situation in which "everything which we have been given as faith is tumbling in our midst."³⁰¹ Our situation, Altizer suggests, is apocalyptic, and the received categories of theological thinking are no longer adequate. The finale of *A Dream Play* is, perhaps more than anything else Strindberg wrote, apocalyptic, and Altizer elucidates the problem of reading this.

The Daughter departs, promising to carry humanity's complaint "to the throne."³⁰² So saying, she disappears into the growing castle which bursts into flame, illuminating a backdrop formed of a wall of faces in various attitudes of sorrow and despair. Finally, the bud on top of the castle blossoms into a giant chrysanthemum. This is apocalyptic, certainly, but the symbolism is not in any easily recognizable sense Christian. The burning castle and the wall of suffering faces suggests, on the one hand, an ancient Buddhist parable that equates the world with a house "burned by the flames of aging and dying, and by the flames of greed, hatred and delusion."³⁰³ On the other hand it evokes the cosmic conflagration of Ragnarok in Norse mythology, in which the entire cosmos is burned up and the gods are destroyed. As Altizer implies, the really apocalyptic vision is difficult to read because in it categories collapse. This problem afflicts any reading of *A Dream Play*. It eschews stable frames of reference

³⁰¹ Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The Descent into Hell: A Study of the Radical Reversal of the Christian Consciousness* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1970), p. 175

³⁰² Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel*, p. 199

³⁰³ Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "War and Peace in Buddhism," in *War and Peace in World Religions*, Perry Schmidt-Leukel (ed.) (London: SCM Press, 2004), p. 37

— rather it has frames within frames that elide and collapse into each other. Hence the understandable anxiety on the part of theatre directors to create a stable frame of reference, usually by making an intervention to establish *who* is doing the dreaming. Yet, my argument suggests, to do so is to betray Strindberg's vision. The ending, though strangely moving, finally resists a 'closed' theological reading.

And yet Altizer, as well as elucidating the problems of reading the apocalyptic ending, also offers a way of approaching it — and potentially finding in it a profoundly religious moment. For Altizer, the fall is total. It affects not just humanity but God. "From this point of view, everything which fallen man envisions and conceives as God is a fallen form of God ... the mystery, the distance and the transcendence of God can here be understood as products of the fall."³⁰⁴ The Christian conception of the utter transcendence of God puts Him at an unbreachable remove from humanity. As Strindberg himself found, the fall makes it impossible to reach back to an original harmony — hence, he finds the world to be a distorted mirror image of an unreachable original. Altizer argues that only an apocalyptic renewal of Christianity — and an apocalyptic renewal of consciousness — can restore the breach — and for this to become possible, theology has to reach beyond its credal boundaries.

A Dream Play ends on a promise, yet this promise emerges out of an apocalyptic negation. The promise is implied in the bud that finally blossoms above the burning castle. Out of an absolute negation emerges a universal compassion. Altizer suggests a way of reading this: that an apocalyptic darkness may give way to a transformation of consciousness and of experience, even a transformed world. He affirms the

³⁰⁴ Altizer, *The Descent into Hell*, p. 180

possibility that "the loss of all we have known as identity and selfhood can be accepted and affirmed as the realization of the presence and compassion of Christ."³⁰⁵

Perhaps this is why the concluding vision of *A Dream Play* is so moving.

Here, too, the play seems to take on a liturgical role. But just as the received categories of metaphysical theology cannot contain and interpret the apocalyptic vision Altizer alludes to (and Strindberg here presents such a vision, or so I have argued), the kind of liturgical theatre emerging in *A Dream Play* can only take place outside the Church. In this Strindberg anticipates Grotowski: a theatre of the holy is necessarily a theatre of blasphemy.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 214

4. Four Chamber Plays

To appreciate the extent to which Strindberg with a number of contemporaries made modern theatre possible, you first have to appreciate the state of theatre when he began his career. In the 1860s and 70s, Sweden's Royal Theatre required that all new plays

[...] should preferably be in five acts [...] division into scenes or scene-changes were not liked [...] every act ought to have a beginning, a middle and an end. The end of an act should be a place for applause, accomplished by an oratorical flourish, and if the piece was in un-rhymed verse the last two lines should rhyme.³⁰⁶

Plays typically contained monologues and solo-pieces for the star-players, and required a declamatory style of acting. By Strindberg's account, when he wrote his first play according to this formula and read it to his friends he found that the whole play was one immense *longueur*.³⁰⁷ Strindberg looked back to this as the ultimate origin of his chamber plays, formed by the need that had driven most of his subsequent dramatic writing: to discover the requirements for a revitalised theatre.

Strindberg credits the founding of the Théâtre Libre in Paris in 1887, and its opening production of Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*, with first revealing the possibilities of a concentrated piece of theatre embodying a strong theme.³⁰⁸ This appears to have inspired Strindberg to write his naturalist masterpieces *The Father*, *Miss Julie* and *Creditors*. The renewal of theatre brought about by naturalism was short-lived, however, and shortly after the turn of the twentieth century the theatrical avant-garde

³⁰⁶ Strindberg, *Samlade Verk*, vol. 64, p. 11

³⁰⁷ Ibid., pp. 11-12

³⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 12

turned to music for inspiration when the Austrian director Max Reinhardt opened the Kammerspiel-Haus in Berlin. Here, as Strindberg puts it, "the concept of chamber music [was] transferred to drama: the intimate proceedings, the meaningful theme, the sophisticated treatment."³⁰⁹ This was the inspiration for Stockholm's Intimate Theatre, opened in 1907 by the actor August Falck specifically to stage Strindberg's work.³¹⁰ The place really was intimate: a mere 161 seats in the auditorium and a cramped stage.³¹¹ It was for this theatre that Strindberg wrote his *Chamber Plays*. Strindberg describes the intent of the Intimate Theatre and of his Chamber Plays as follows:

In the drama we look for a strong meaningful theme, but with limits. In production we avoid all show, all calculated effects, places for applause, star-roles, solo-numbers. No preconceived form shall bind the writer, as the theme dictates the form. Freedom, that is, in the treatment, bound only by the unity of conception and style.³¹²

This theatrical space aimed to make a more genuine communication between actors and audience possible. Its intimacy allowed subtle shifts of expression to register with the audience. And whereas the large commercial theatres of the day required actors to shout their lines,³¹³ at the Intimate Theatre the voices could be heard throughout the auditorium without the actors having to project, allowing subtle changes in tone to

³⁰⁹ Ibid., p.13 It seems that two of Strindberg's own early one-act pieces, *Den Fredlöse* and *Bandet*, in turn inspired Max Reinhardt.

³¹⁰ Strindberg often had difficulty getting his plays performed in Sweden. Thus *Miss Julie*, written in 1888, had its world-premiere in Copenhagen (although even this was fraught – the original performance was cancelled due to charges of obscenity). Its Swedish premiere only took place almost twenty years later, in 1905.

³¹¹ The recently re-opened Intima Teatern is even more intimate, with just 95 seats arranged in an arc around a stage that bulges out in the centre.

³¹² Strindberg, *Samlade Verk*, vol. 64, p.13

³¹³ As Strindberg puts it "there are theatres so large ...[that] you have to yell declarations of love, communicate a confidence like the report of a rifle, whisper the secret of your heart in a full-throated shout." Ibid., p. 14

remain audible. *The Chamber Plays* make use of these qualities; they are small-scale dramas with a domestic setting. The closeness of the audience, virtually nose to nose with the actors, in any case makes this almost inevitable. These are plays in which "the plot [focuses] more on inner rather than outer events."³¹⁴

The Chamber Plays, in contrast to *To Damascus* and *A Dream Play*, have a much more naturalistic causal narrative logic. Although still fresh, they look, at a distance of a hundred years, more conventional and more realistic (bearing in mind that the conventions of realistic theatre were themselves still fairly new at this point): they do not attempt in the same way to put a dream on stage. The action, the characters and the setting are deceptively realistic and everyday (the building in *The Storm*, for instance, is described as a "modern house exterior"). However these plays still have something of the "horrible half-reality" of *To Damascus*. This is especially true of *The Ghost Sonata*, with its pleasure in the grotesque verging at times on gothic horror. They are dark pieces, obsessed with mortality and crime. As one critic puts it, the characters are "caught in various stages of damnation."³¹⁵ This makes them more than naturalistic. They deal not so much with the dissection of social relations, though they have an element of that, but rather with a metaphysical unease. We will explore what I mean by this as we look in more detail at each Chamber Play in turn.³¹⁶

One further aspect of the Intimate Theatre, for which these plays were written, bears on the interpretation. Strindberg was deeply impressed by a painting by the Swiss

³¹⁴ Ibid., vol. 58, p. 368

³¹⁵ Lagerkrantz, *August Strindberg*, p. 333

³¹⁶ I have omitted any discussion of Strindberg's fifth and final chamber play, *The Black Glove*. Written one and a half years after the last of the other chamber plays, it is a Christmas play given over largely to moralistic sentimentality. At base, it contains a vicious morality of a kind that Strindberg elsewhere questioned and undermined.

artist Böcklin entitled *Toten-Insel* (The Isle of the Dead).³¹⁷ There are several versions of this painting, but the one Strindberg knew depicts a rocky island with a grove of cypresses in the middle. To the right are entrances to what appear to be tombs cut into the rock. In the foreground a small boat approaches the island across calm waters; in the boat a figure shrouded in white stands looking towards the island, in front of him in the boat a white coffin. A copy of this painting hung to the right of the stage in the original Intimate Theatre, while a copy of another Böcklin painting, *The Isle of the Living*, hung to the left. The events onstage, then, take place in a borderland between life and death. Indeed, Strindberg began to write a chamber play called *Toten-Insel*. In this drama, which exists only as a fragment, a dead man, Assir, is ferried to the Isle of the Dead, awakens and undergoes a Swedenborgian "disrobing."³¹⁸ As in the dream plays, scenery changes and characters appear according to imaginative leaps and changes of mood. The post-mortem world inhabited by Assir is partially a projection of his own mind. Strindberg never completed *Toten-Insel*, but the fragment of it that exists leaves a space for a play within the play. It appears that Strindberg originally intended *Toten-Insel* to form a frame around the fourth chamber play, *The Pelican*.³¹⁹ Strindberg seems to have intended with these plays to expose and explore the human soul.

If the theatrical space of these plays blurs the boundary between life and death, it is also a place where inner and outer blur into each other. This bears on another factor shared by all *Chamber Plays*: the nature of the settings. Each one takes place in and around a house or apartment building. These are not just backdrops to the action, but integral to it. In his life, Strindberg was acutely aware of buildings' atmospheres, the

³¹⁷ Arnold Böcklin, *Toten-Insel*, third version, National Gallery, Berlin 1883

³¹⁸ See below, p. 143

³¹⁹ Strindberg, *Samlade Verk*, vol. 63, p. 409

imprint left by former tenants. Thus the building in *The Storm* has a character – it is secretive and deceitful. In other words, the settings express the states of mind of the characters.

In this, Strindberg probably took his cue from the writings of Emmanuel Swedenborg. Swedenborg treats heaven and hell as states of mind. Thus he denies that Satan was the cause of hell. Rather, he holds that hell comes from human beings, and after death the soul departs to whatever region most closely conforms to its own tendencies, whether hellish or heavenly. In the *Arcana Coelestia* he states that after death everyone comes “into that hell or into that heaven in which he has been while in the world.”³²⁰ Indeed, he states that to vicious natures, heaven is stifling and appears a hell.³²¹ Swedenborg had, then, an oddly psychological theology: he envisioned the post-mortem states of the soul as literal heavens and hells, but these heavens and hells, actual places as far as Swedenborg was concerned, were also externalisations of each individual’s state of mind. Under Swedenborg’s influence, the stage was made by Strindberg “to serve as the area in which the subtle and unseen tremors of the soul would manifest themselves in the visible and palpable things of the physical world.”³²²

Deceit and crime hide behind the façades of the buildings at the centre of each of these dramas. They express in physical form the mental lives of the characters who live in them. All these dramas, furthermore, take place in a borderland between life and death, and the buildings also represent the world. Here, the world itself shows an

³²⁰ Emanuel Swedenborg, *The Essential Swedenborg: Basic Teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg, Scientist, Philosopher and Theologian* (New York: Twain, 1970), p. 105

³²¹ Ibid., p. 119

³²² Evert Sprinchorn, *Strindberg as Dramatist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 107

elegant exterior but deceitfully hides its true nature. Behind each façade lies an uneasy consciousness of the void. And for all Strindberg's overtly stated faith by this point of his life, his words from the original ending of *Inferno* still echo uneasily here: "What a jest, what a miserable jest, this life is after all!"³²³

*Oväder (The Storm)*³²⁴

The Chamber Plays represent a partial return to naturalism, evident here in the setting: it takes place at a particular time and in a particular place. The play is set in the city during the "dog days" (rötmånadsvärme) of late summer, when most Swedish city-dwellers are out in the countryside. Although the city is never named, from references to the archipelago (skärgårn) and southerners, it seems fair to conclude that the play takes place somewhere in Stockholm. The setting is the front of a house or rather apartment building with a corner to the right, beyond which is seen a square with roses and other flowers. There is a letterbox set into the corner, while toward the left of the house's façade is a low doorway leading both to a courtyard and to the confectioner's in the basement. This set takes on something of the quality that Freud described as "das Unheimlich," the uncanny.³²⁵ The German word *Heimlich*, as Freud explains, means homely but also carries the sense of something secret, hidden. *Unheimlich*, then, takes on the meaning both of something strange and of something exposed. The play's protagonist, the Gentleman, lives a well-ordered life in a well-ordered apartment in which memories of his past are carefully controlled or

³²³ Strindberg, *Inferno*, 272

³²⁴ The Consul is listed in the *dramatis personae* as "The Brother, a Consul". In writing about the play, it quickly gets confusing to refer the Brother, and then talk about the Brother's brother, i.e. the Gentleman. Referring to him as the Consul proved easier.

³²⁵ Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), pp. 219-252

suppressed. However, he is at times disturbed by the heat coming from the Confectioner's flat in the basement, at other times by the noise from the apartment above his. As we learn in the course of the play, the latter especially turns out to be connected with a past, the chaos and distress of which the Gentleman has been trying to pretend did not exist. Thus the set itself is a physical projection of the Gentleman's psyche, apparently well-constructed and orderly, but concealing horrors that threaten to destroy him.³²⁶

Like the other *Chamber Plays*, *The Storm* is naturalistic in its return to something like the causal narrative logic of Strindberg's pre-Inferno work. It has a three act structure, and ties up all the narrative threads at the end. It does not contain the deliberate dissonance and fragmentation of *A Dream Play* or, to a lesser extent, *To Damascus*. This more conventional narrative structure itself has theological implications. It lends itself to a temporal progression in which a providential design gradually becomes evident, working with an ultimately benign end. However, an undercurrent of unease remains throughout the play. The protagonist is, in the final act, confronted by the void. The confrontation lasts only a moment before the ending resolves all the loose ends, together with the protagonist's doubts and fears. A providential design seems here to trump the crisis brought on by facing an ultimate emptiness. These themes play out through a rather involved plot, which I summarise here, before moving on to a more detailed discussion.

In the opening scene, the Consul's conversation with the Confectioner (who lives in the basement) reveals that a surprising number of deaths have taken place in the

³²⁶ I do not intend here to do a full Freudian reading of this play. For reasons I explain below, I regard Freud's reductionistic account of the uncanny to be unsatisfying. Nevertheless, aspects of his analysis are acute, and take on a literal significance in regard to this play.

building, that it is known as the "silent house", and that new tenants have moved into the flat above the Gentleman's (the protagonist, and brother of the Consul), although nobody has seen them. The Gentleman comes out of his flat (you can see into his drawing room through the ground floor windows) and complains about the new tenants, who have tormented him with the sound of terrible music and card-playing, and the noise of carriages coming in the middle of the night to fetch people away. As they discuss this a man in a tuxedo (Fischer) emerges from the building to put a large number of letters in the letterbox.

The Gentleman reveals to the Consul the true story of his marriage. He had promised his wife, who was much younger, that when his age became burdensome he would set her free, and so a little after their child was born he left. At this point the Consul tells the Gentleman that after he left her, his ex-wife murdered his honour to protect herself. The Gentleman refuses to hear more and merely says he wants to live in his flat with his beautiful memories. While the two old men go for a walk, a wine-seller comes looking for Mr Fischer, the tenant above the Gentleman. The Consul returns alone, and picks up a card dropped by Fischer, an invitation to the "Boston Club", apparently a gambling den.

After a drawn out shriek from the upper flat, a woman emerges, clearly upset. The Consul moves towards her, and they recognise each other – it is Gerda, the Gentleman's ex-wife. In the ensuing conversation it emerges that the Consul knows considerably more about his brother's relationship to Gerda than he has let on. Indeed, he feels considerable guilt, for he accuses Gerda of dishonouring the Gentleman, and of tricking the Consul into taking her part. At this point the

Gentleman returns and goes into his flat. He does not see Gerda and the Consul, who are hidden by the corner of the house. By this point evening has fallen, and as Gerda and the Consul peer at the Gentleman through the window, he looks up and stares directly at them. At that moment, a flash of lightning illuminates the pair, and the Gentleman reacts with horror. However he quickly recovers himself, and unsure of what he has seen, calls to his brother to come in and play chess. The first act ends as the Consul, ignoring his brother, accompanies Gerda to try and save her daughter from the violent and dissolute Fischer.

Act 2 takes place inside the house, in the Gentleman's living room. He sits playing chess with Louise, his maid, and complaining about the noise from upstairs and the heat from below, and for the first time intimates that he is unhappy and might move. Immediately afterwards, however, he tells the Confectioner he will never move, repeating how he prizes isolation. Finally the Consul turns up, and in conversation raises the possibility that his wife may have re-married and his daughter acquired an abusive stepfather. The Gentleman reveals that he has been haunted by thoughts of his daughter, seeming to hear her footsteps and even her voice. The Gentleman exits, clearly upset, to write a letter, and the Consul invites Gerda in. She is astonished to find everything preserved exactly as it was, and explains to the Consul how she and the Gentleman had grown to hate each other. From Gerda's account, it sounds like a stormy marriage. It comes out in their conversation that Fischer has fled, taking Gerda's daughter with him as a hostage to make Gerda follow him. The Consul persuades Gerda to remain and face the Gentleman. At first the Gentleman does not recognise her, but there soon follow arguments and accusations about their past

together, when it comes out that the Gentleman was actually much more aware of what was going on than he has let on.

The Gentleman is finally stirred to some kind of activity when a telephone call informs him that Herr Fischer has run away in the company of the Confectioner's daughter. Gerda is suddenly struck with pangs of conscience, as her daughter is also with Fischer, and although the Gentleman refuses to go with her, he rouses his brother and sends them off to the police. Struck also by conscience, he questions Louise about Fischer. She says she has learned to keep quiet in the house. Finally breaking out of his passivity, the Gentleman acknowledges that their "assumed deafness"³²⁷ has gone on too long and become life-threatening.

In the final act, most of the action takes place offstage. It has rained, and the Gentleman sits outside and converses with the Confectioner and with Louise, until the Confectioner's daughter turns up. The Confectioner's dialogue hints that he knows what has gone on, but leaves it ambiguous. The Consul returns, and reveals that Gerda has retrieved her daughter and Fischer has departed. The Gentleman, although happy that everything has begun to sort itself out, fears that his ex-wife and daughter will move in again. He is relieved when a telephone call informs him that Gerda and her child have moved in with Gerda's mother. All the loose ends are tied up, and the Gentleman tells the Confectioner that soon he will move out of the silent house.

Superficially, the play eulogises the calmness of age, which despite a late storm is re-established at the end. A providential design becomes evident in the later stages when

³²⁷ August Strindberg, *Skrifter*, vol. 12, Gunnar Brandell (ed.), (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1951), p. 302

everything works out for the best, and the Gentleman prepares to die. However, as noted the play contains a repressed stratum of unease, of the uncanny, beneath the surface. Indeed it runs as an undercurrent from the very beginning. Freud's essay "The Uncanny" becomes useful here for its taxonomy of the uncanny. He begins from a linguistic dissection of the German *heimlich*, "the canny," a word with two contrasting senses: i. the homely, domestic and tame; ii. the secretive, hidden and furtive. While the former sense carries overtones of security and ease, the latter connotes something "concealed, kept from sight ... [and] withheld from others."³²⁸ Thus the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*), which carries overtones of the supernatural and fearful, shades into the canny (*heimlich*).³²⁹ From this follows Freud's definition of the uncanny:

the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.³³⁰

He then argues via a variety of examples that the experience of the uncanny arises "either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed."³³¹ Thus the uncanny contains within itself an ambivalent motion; something repressed and secret is brought to conscious awareness and produces a special sense of fear.

Fear of death is a particularly potent source of the uncanny, and we encounter it at the beginning of *The Storm*: at the start of the play, the Consul and the Confectioner

³²⁸ Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, p. 223

³²⁹ As Freud puts it, "*heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*." Ibid., p. 226

³³⁰ Ibid., p. 220

³³¹ Ibid., p. 249

discuss the unusual number of deaths in the house, the Consul commenting: "those four red blinds look like stage curtains behind which they rehearse bloody dramas ... at least that's what I imagine."³³² This evokes a sense of unease. Despite the appearance of a modern apartment building in a prosperous suburb, the house seems from the start to hide unpleasant secrets. The Gentleman, similarly, lives secluded among beautified and false memories. Thus the building itself comes to resemble the state of mind of the Gentleman. The basement, where the bakery runs all night long, disturbs his sleep with its heat, whilst the new neighbours upstairs keep him awake with their noise. He carefully ignores the unpleasant events around him, maintaining himself in an apartment that has not changed in years, yet at night darker thoughts intrude and disturb his sleep, while the letterbox on the corner seems to hide many secrets; as the Gentleman himself says, "it has accepted confidences..."³³³ The letterbox, we have seen, contains invitations to a gambling club run by his ex-wife's husband. As this is revealed the Gentleman recalls a great many things he would rather forget. The Gentleman's calm demeanour therefore hides a guilty conscience. He abandoned his wife and child, and has suppressed the realities of the life they shared – that it was marred by infidelity and jealousy, and characterised as much by hate as by love.

We have also seen that the Consul had quite probably had an affair with Gerda, and that the Gentleman had been half-aware of it. Thus the Gentleman reacts with horror when he sees, by a lightning flash, Gerda and the Consul standing next to each other outside his window. His look of horror implies perhaps a supernatural dread, that he has seen a memory that haunted him made real.

³³² Strindberg, *Skrifter*, vol. 12, pp. 289-90

³³³ *Ibid.*, p. 290

This Freudian return of the repressed coincides with the play's Swedenborgian aspect. Indeed, if the set is a model of the Gentleman's psyche, it also resembles Swedenborg's account of the post-mortem state of the soul when the newly deceased perceive their surroundings according to the qualities of their own minds. Thus the "silent house" corresponds to the Gentleman's own deliberate isolation. He tells his brother "I am closing my accounts with life and with people, and I'm already packing for the journey; the loneliness is not so good, but when nobody has any claims on you, you've won your freedom."³³⁴ He has become blind by choice, as have the other occupants of the house. Louise tells the Confectioner that she "love[s] the calm and the dignified, pleasant reserve, when you don't say everything and when you feel bound to overlook the less pleasant everyday..."³³⁵ The Confectioner says that his wife is going blind but does not want an operation: "There's nothing to look at, she says, and she sometimes wishes she was deaf as well."³³⁶ This implies the opposite, that there is indeed something to see and listen to, but she does not want to. The Confectioner himself seems to realise this, saying "We old people love the dusk, it hides so many failings in us and in others."³³⁷

Just as the building seems to conceal crimes, the Gentleman's reserve and nostalgia conceal the truth about his past. He is already haunted by memories of his wife and child before he finds Gerda in his flat. And he is quite literally kept awake by them at night, although he does not know it is them. When he finally meets Gerda, the confrontation shatters the illusion of their happy marriage. He accuses Gerda of

³³⁴ Ibid., p. 290

³³⁵ Ibid., p. 292

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Ibid.

turning his colleagues and employees against him, and of leading his own brother to betray him. He goes on that her careless talk led to doubts over their daughter's legitimacy. Gerda seems to have been unfaithful. In Act 3, for instance, seeing the Consul approaching, the Gentleman launches into a tirade about his ex-wife's ability to seduce everyone except him. He found her ugly and stupid where all others found her beautiful and intelligent. This, together with the Consul's sense of guilt, imply that Gerda had an affair with him. It may also imply that the daughter was actually the Consul's. This would explain the references to the Gentleman being too old for Gerda: that he had become impotent through age. In their divorce case, he says, he had testified that he had become too old, going on "I could hardly say we were too old when we got married, because then the child's arrival would have had an unpleasant interpretation, and it was our child, wasn't it?"³³⁸ The Gentleman seems to have doubts about his child's parentage himself. This is an old theme for Strindberg, the father duped into bringing up someone else's child.³³⁹ One other thing comes partially to light: the implication that they married out of lust. When Gerda asks the Gentleman why he married her he replies "You know well enough why a man gets married; and you also know I didn't need to beg for your love."³⁴⁰ The heat issuing from the basement of the silent house also, then, stands for the Gentleman's stifled libido. The Gentleman's attempt to escape his past is also an attempt to escape his own desire. However he has not escaped its consequences, and sexual desire drives all the misfortunes in the play. It drove the Gentleman, already old, to marry Gerda; it caused their divorce; it causes Fischer to run off with the Confectioner's daughter.

³³⁸ Ibid., p. 300

³³⁹ This was particularly the case in Strindberg's great naturalistic drama, *The Father*.

³⁴⁰ Strindberg, *Skrifter*, vol. 12, p. 300

The stripping of the Gentleman's pretences alludes to another Swedenborgian doctrine, this one again having psychological implications. According to this, after death the souls of the departed find themselves in a disrobing room, in which, in Strindberg's words, "they are stripped of the clothes they were forced to wear by their society, their social circle and family; and the angels presently see how they really are."³⁴¹ In fact there is an element of this disrobing in all the *Chamber Plays*. While this has a moralistic overtone in Swedenborg, Strindberg felt very uncomfortable about it. As he says in *A Blue Book*, "a person who feels shame for his faults of course conceals them; and to brag about his wrongdoing is shameless. Is it right to call that hypocrisy? - Hardly, especially as it's equally wrong however you behave."³⁴² For Strindberg, it further illustrates why it is so hard being human. Indeed, he calls it "impossible."³⁴³

The 'disrobing' of the Gentleman has contradictory effects. On the one hand, the narrative takes a redemptive turn beginning in act 2. On the other, it leaves a void. Towards the end of Act 2 the Gentleman, at last throwing off his passivity and the fraudulent calm he has so carefully maintained, sends his brother to retrieve the Confectioner's daughter, as well as his own. He tells his brother not to say anything to Herr Starck, the Confectioner, for "everything can still be set right. Poor man - and poor Gerda [...]"³⁴⁴ There is in this an acknowledgment of wrong-doing on all sides. Significantly, the cause has been lust - both the cause of Gerda and the Gentleman's wedding, quite possibly of their separation and divorce, and now of the abduction of Gerda's daughter and the seduction of the Confectioner's daughter. The

³⁴¹ Strindberg, *Samlade Verk*, vol. 65, p. 56

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Strindberg, *Skrifter*, vol. 12, p. 301

play adheres to the sexual morality of the day here, and coincides with Strindberg's own agonising guilt over sexual desire. But there is here also a redemptive hope. As if to make sure the audience could not miss the redemptive theme, in the line immediately preceding, the Consul declares that he naturally wishes to help, adding "[w]e are all human beings in Jesus' name!"³⁴⁵

The final act resolves conflict into reconciliation and implies a redemptive conclusion to suffering. It also implies a re-integration of the Gentleman's psyche on a sounder basis, as he has lived through the return of the repressed. When the Confectioner's daughter returns, upset and afraid, he adopts a forgiving and conciliatory tone. At this, the Gentleman remarks that everything is righting itself. A beneficent providential design seems to become evident, as some long-standing themes in Strindberg's work get an airing before they are resolved. Thus the Gentleman feels a surge of anger and jealousy as the Consul returns to explain that Gerda grabbed her daughter off Fischer and escaped. He angrily rejects the Consul's attempt to point out the extenuating circumstances around Fischer's behaviour. He does not wish to hear an enemy praised. He worries that his ex-wife and child will once again move in above him, and he will find the same situation repeating itself, like a lesson repeated over and over: "do it again, do it again, always repeating old lessons!"³⁴⁶ This is a recurring motif in Strindberg. His characters frequently express the fear that they must repeat the same lessons over and over, without end. The significance here is that eternal recurrence undoes a sense of meaningful pattern and defeats progress. Without the possibility of progress, providence becomes impossible. Repetition can

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 304

also occasion, as Freud points out, an experience of the uncanny.³⁴⁷ Freud relates this to the character of neuroses themselves that typically entail involuntary repetition.

The Gentleman then reflects that Gerda's jealousy over Louise shows that there is a vengeful justice in life. He remarks bitterly that nobody sees the justice in their own humiliation, that justice is only for others. This, again, is familiar stuff from Strindberg, but it has a particular point to it. The phone rings, and the Gentleman is sure that it means bad news. To his surprise, he finds out that Gerda and their child have moved in with Gerda's mother. All has worked out for the best, despite the Gentleman's fears. The ending attempts to resolve Strindberg's characteristic dissatisfactions with life: that it is a meaningless jest; a futile series of repeated lessons; characterised by jealousy, humiliation and strife. The storm of the title has passed, and it has purged the Gentleman's life. "That was a blessed rain," he declares.³⁴⁸

The storm has also, however, left a void. It was always there, but the Gentleman has avoided gazing into it by surrounding himself with illusions. This may be why he says he finds the long summer evenings unnatural – the daylight reveals too much.³⁴⁹ The sight of his empty flat prompts him to say "[...] empty rooms when they're well-lit are more horrible than darkness ... you see ghosts."³⁵⁰ He complains that Gerda has destroyed all his beautiful memories "and there is nothing left."³⁵¹ The void left by the storm horrifies the Gentleman: "It looks so empty in there! Like it does after

³⁴⁷ Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, pp. 237-8

³⁴⁸ Strindberg, *Skrifter*, vol. 12, p. 305

³⁴⁹ In *Winter Light* Bergman, who knows Strindberg intimately, uses harsh, overexposed daylight as the pastor loses his belief.

³⁵⁰ Strindberg, *Skrifter*, vol. 12, p. 302

³⁵¹ Ibid.

someone has moved out ... and up there, it looks like it does after a conflagration!"³⁵²

But the void also represents freedom: Louise points out, "But this is liberation!" The climax of *A Dream Play*, dramatically and thematically, occurs when the Daughter opens the clover-leaf door and reveals the secret of the universe: nothing. This vacuum is ambiguous. It could be taken as an absolute negation, a nihilistic abyss that robs the world and our life in it of significance. Strindberg refers to this possibility at the end of *Inferno* when he declares life to be a miserable jest. The abyss could also be a divine void, liberating by its very groundlessness. Either way, it strikes suspicion if not downright fear into the hearts of the four Deans, who immediately embark on persecuting the revealer of this mystery. In the above lines from *The Storm* the void returns. Louise sees it as the Gentleman's liberation, but for the Gentleman himself it holds destruction.

I have implied a parallel between the imposition of a Providential design as a means to explain away the unease expressed in the play when the Gentleman confronts the void, and a naively Freudian reading that resolves the unease caused by repressed complexes resolved by a process of psychoanalytic exposure to restore psychological calm. Freud helps to identify and analyse some of the unease running like an underground stream under the play and occasionally breaking out above ground, yet ultimately a thoroughly Freudian reading does a disservice to the play. This is because it must reduce the play to Freudian categories. Thus Freud's analysis of ETA Hoffman's story "The Sand-Man" reduces its uncanny terror to a childhood complex – the fear of castration. This is Freud's most characteristic move: to reduce the uncanny in all its varieties to an "infantile factor" or a psychological complex. This is

³⁵² Ibid., p. 303

accompanied by a glib equation between childhood fears, "primitive" beliefs and neurosis.³⁵³ *The Storm* is not, however, reducible to these terms. For Freud accepts, seemingly as self-evident, the post-enlightenment rationalistic and materialistic interpretation of the world; while Strindberg continually questions what the world is. The latter's dramatic investigation of character and memory is therefore situated within a drama that does not take a scientific materialistic world-view for granted. In *The Storm* the return of Gerda and the resurfacing of the Gentleman's suppressed memories destroy the latter's illusion of a homely, pleasant life. Indeed, his life as he has represented it is a sham. But this removal of his illusions forces the Gentleman, for a moment, to confront the void. This void belies not only his past and his social life, it belies the world. A psychoanalytic 'closure' of the play is no less an explaining away than the assertion that a divine Providence does after all organize the world.

An uneasy sense of ultimate emptiness, then, underlies the Gentleman's superficial calm. As events strip him of his illusions, he confronts, for a moment, this emptiness. He looks into the abyss. However, the neat conclusion re-asserts the operation of a divine Providence. Life does, after all, follow a narrative pattern with a more or less happy ending and everything, finally, works out for the best. The ultimate emptiness that confronts the Gentleman, however, returns to haunt the three subsequent *Chamber Plays*, and they end with much less certainty about a benevolent Providential design.

Brända Tomten (The Burnt House)

³⁵³ This theme is remarkably consistent in this essay. See, for example (this is not an exhaustive list), Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, pp. 235, 240, 244.

In this play, a crime has been committed, and the investigation implicates everyone. A house has burnt down, apparently from an act of arson. Into this walks the Stranger, a son of the house who has wandered the world for many years. He gradually reveals the corruption of his respectable family. In doing so, he finds that a web links the destinies of everyone. Furthermore, this web consists of mutual guilt: all are sinned against, and all are guilty. This resembles the conception of karma found in HP Blavatsky, whose *Secret Doctrine* Strindberg had read, according to which "every person from birth until death weaves around themselves thread after thread, as a spider its web."³⁵⁴ The play thus explores two related themes: original sin, and life as a web. It addresses the question, is this web redeemable?

The play opens on the burnt out ruin of the Dyer's house. The ruin reveals that the house had a double wall. Thematically this becomes important. The double wall stands for the duplicity of the family that lived there. The profession of the head of the household also relates to this duplicity. He dyes cloth, changing its appearance. The house has had a malign influence on its occupants, as the Old Woman explains:

[...] so much has happened in this house, so much. I thought the time had come for it to be smoked out – Ugh, what a house! One came, another went, but they always came back, and here they died, here they were born, here they got married and divorced.³⁵⁵

This suggests that the house, like the cave in *A Dream Play*, represents the world. Its occupants are born, live and die inside it, and they are forever bound to it. They cannot escape.

³⁵⁴ Quoted in Lamm, *Strindberg och Makterna*, p. 133

³⁵⁵ Strindberg, *Skrifter*, vol. 12, p. 311

Behind the house lies an orchard. This carries Edenic overtones. It is under a tree in this orchard that the Stranger suffers his own personal fall. Strindberg interweaves a Biblical motif here, in a technique he also used in *A Blue Book*. In the latter, he recounts two visits to an island in the Stockholm archipelago. On his first visit, he sees it as a paradise. On his second, some years later and having lost his innocence, it resembles hell:

My verdant isle, my youth's first paradise became so ugly to me, so horrible ... the lovely bays began to stink, so that I got malaria; the mosquitoes tormented us all night and got through the finest net; if I wandered in the woods and stooped to pick a flower, an adder would raise its head.³⁵⁶

The island, which once seemed an Eden, is now full of serpents. Sexual awakening has intervened between the two (in this piece, he mentions that his companions were treating "incurable diseases," presumably a reference to syphilis. The only cure, at the time, was to inject mercury.) In *A Burnt House*, Strindberg makes similar use of the book of Genesis. The Stranger recounts his own sexual awakening: he found a book hidden on his father's bookshelf— "a certain knight's notorious memoirs"³⁵⁷ — and sat under an oak tree to read it. "We called it the tree of knowledge all right. And with that I left childhood's paradise and was initiated too early into the secrets that ... well!"³⁵⁸ The depiction of the post-fall world in *A Burnt House* is, like that in *A Blue Book*, also grim. In *A Blue Book*, the pupil says "we slandered each other, suspected each other, even of theft [...] we quarrelled from morning till night."³⁵⁹ So the community round the burnt house pursues petty hatreds and rivalries. Everyone

³⁵⁶ Strindberg, *Samlade Verk*, vol. 65, p. 29

³⁵⁷ Strindberg, *Skrifter*, vol. 12, p. 316

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

³⁵⁹ Strindberg, *Samlade Verk*, vol. 65, p. 29

suspects everyone else, and they all slander each other. As the Old Woman says, "everyone quarrels and grates on each other in this neighbourhood."³⁶⁰

In *The Storm*, the Gentleman goes through a Swedenborgian 'disrobing'. This disrobing motif is repeated in *The Burnt House*. The Stranger, who turns out to be the Dyer's brother, returns after many years travelling the world. The Dyer reacts with alarm and guilt as the Stranger begins to sift through the ruins. The Stranger tells the Dyer about an old schoolmate he met in America, who revealed during a train journey the truth about their respectable family. Their parents were scoundrels, the family fortune based on smuggling. The Stranger points out the double walls. He says his hair turned grey that night as he had to revise his image of the entire family:

I had to sit and repaint all their faces, strip them, pull them down, and get them out of my mind. [...] Then they began to haunt me; bits of the smashed figures put themselves back together, but not quite right, and they became a waxwork museum of monsters.³⁶¹

All the 'uncles' who visited the home to play cards and stay for supper when they were children were also smugglers. The family's respectable reputation was a sham, and their parents were criminals. Virtually all the characters in the play are similarly deceptive. So, for example, a man that the Stranger had revered for his honesty, turned out to be a crooked policeman and manipulator. Similarly, the Dyer had deprived his brother of his inheritance. The Stranger himself wrecked the Painter's chances of an artistic career.

³⁶⁰ Strindberg, *Skrifver*, vol. 12, p. 311

³⁶¹ Ibid., p. 315

This mutual wrongdoing does not ultimately result, in these plays, from conscious malice or hypocrisy. It reflects the nature of the world, and the nature of character according to Strindberg's conception of it. The play dramatises this when the Stranger tells the Wife that she does not fit the way she had been described. The Wife replies:

Wife: Yes, people do each other such injustice, and they re-paint each other, each one in their own image...

The Stranger: And they go round like theatre directors and give out roles to each other; some accept their role, others give it back and prefer to improvise...³⁶²

The injustices people do each other cannot be blamed on bad character because, according to Strindberg, character is nebulous. Thus the Stranger fails to find out from the Stonecutter what character his sister-in-law has. The Stonecutter cannot understand what the Stranger means. The Stranger exclaims in frustration "I mean her temperament!"³⁶³, to which the Stonecutter replies, "with me it depends who I'm talking to. With a nice person I'm nice, and with someone nasty I become a wild animal."³⁶⁴ The Stranger tries to make himself clear by asking what she is like in general. The Stonecutter replies that she's "like other people, mostly; gets angry if you tease her; becomes pleasant again; you can't always be in the same mood." They continue

Stranger: I mean, is she happy or gloomy?

Stonecutter: When things are going well, she's happy, and when they're going badly she's sad or annoyed, like the rest of us.

³⁶² Ibid., p. 324

³⁶³ Ibid., p. 322

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

Character here is essentially reactive. We react to others and to our surroundings, or we play out roles the way an actor does. Attempts to reach an essential core, however, fail. People behave the way they do because of circumstance. This is the paradox of the world after the fall. The web that traps the characters is, the Stranger says, "a net that hasn't been made by human beings."³⁶⁵ Because they live in a fallen world, people cannot help acting as they do, and they cannot bear much responsibility for their actions. Strindberg makes this point explicitly in *A Blue Book*, in the passage about the disrobing room quoted above.³⁶⁶

The apparent hypocrisy and vacuity of the characters mirrors the duplicity of the world, so that people "cannot see what is, but only what seems to be."³⁶⁷ The good reputation of the Stranger's family, like the reputation of everyone in the play, is a sham, but this is because the world itself is deceitful. The Stranger, recounting a near-death experience after he attempted suicide, says that he found another world like this one, except that there everything is what it appears.

While the Stranger reveals the web that binds all the characters to each other, a kind of Passion narrative plays out, mostly off-stage. The one innocent character, the Student, is accused of arson and arrested. In the final scene, the Wife reports that the Student will be punished for the crime. Offstage, a drama of atonement and sacrifice has taken place: the Student is a scapegoat, an innocent punished for the wrongdoing of others. And yet the atonement never arrives, because ultimately there is nothing to atone for. The background to the Passion narrative as a sort of scapegoating is this: the human race inherits the guilt of Adam and Eve for the original crime, and Christ

³⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 325

³⁶⁶ See above, p. 143

³⁶⁷ Strindberg, *Skrifter*, vol. 12, p. 319

pays the price for their sin in order to redeem humanity. In *The Burnt House*, however, nobody is responsible. The Stranger asks the Wife who is guilty, and she replies "No-one! --- The fire was an accident!"³⁶⁸ Although everyone sins, nobody is really guilty because they cannot help what they are. In a passage that recalls the Prologue of *A Dream Play*³⁶⁹ the Stranger says that the human race is "dizzy" from the spinning of the Earth, and acts out of madness. The Student does not, therefore, pay the price for another's crime, and thereby atone for the collective guilt of everyone else. He is punished for something that was not even a crime. His suffering is meaningless. The Stranger therefore offers the Wife the only crumb of comfort he can, telling her "[s]uffer! It will pass! This also is vanity."³⁷⁰

Halfway through the play, the Stranger offers up a curious prayer composed of questions:

You little world: the densest of all the planets, the heaviest, and therefore so heavy for you, so difficult to breathe, so heavy to bear; the cross is your symbol, though it could have been a cap and bells or a straitjacket – world of illusions and madmen – Eternal one! Has your earth gone astray in space? And how did she come to spin round so that your children became dizzy and lost their understanding, so that they can't see what is, but only what seems to be? Amen!³⁷¹

The cross is an appropriate symbol for the world, signifying as it does the world's suffering. This passage, however, equates the cross with a cap and bells or a straitjacket, robbing the cross of its redemptive meaning. Original sin endows

³⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 325

³⁶⁹ The Prologue was in fact written at about the same time as *The Burnt House*. The original version of *A Dream Play*, in 1901, did not have a Prologue; it was added later.

³⁷⁰ Strindberg, *Skrifter*, vol. 12, p. 325

³⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 318-19

suffering with meaning and Christ's atonement gives the world a purpose and direction, a telos. The Stranger refers to the world as a web, a cloth or a net. The crucifixion, terrible as it is, promises to endow this cloth with weight and significance. More terrible is the possibility that this cloth is completely without significance. It is a piece of madness, full of illusions.

The play offers a bleak assessment of the human condition. While we do not bear ultimate responsibility, our actions and our suffering are ultimately futile. Like the protagonist of *The Storm*, the Stranger stands somewhat outside life and observes. He returns after many years away and spends his time asking questions, revealing others' deceit and, quite literally, sorting through the ruins. He says of himself that he has stood outside himself ever since his childhood attempt at suicide:

I thought I was in another's body; I took life with a cynical calm [...] I regarded myself as if I was another, and I observed, I studied this other and his fate [...] ³⁷²

In *The Storm*, however, the Gentleman ultimately ceases to be a spectator, and when he does so finds a beneficent Providence is after all at work. *The Burnt House* offers no such comfort. Here human action is futile. We may not ultimately bear responsibility for our condition, but nor can we do anything to remedy it. Towards the end of *The Burnt House*, the Stranger declares "what a weave of lies, mistakes, misunderstandings! And you are supposed to take this seriously!" ³⁷³ Like the equation of the cross with a straightjacket or cap and bells, this echoes the sentiment at the end of Strindberg's *Inferno*, "what a miserable jest this life is after all."

³⁷² Ibid., p. 316

³⁷³ Ibid., p. 324

The Burnt House ends without a conclusion. Although no crime has been committed, an innocent man has been punished. The Stranger, having examined the weave of life, finds he cannot take it seriously. At the end of the play he wanders off into the world again, carrying on much the same as before. And yet the play is not utterly bleak. The Stranger's curious prayer offers, it seems to me, something other than blank despair, even though it consists of negations and questions. In fact, the prayer, like the play itself, is a question without an answer. Like *A Dream Play*, it confronts theodicy and finds it inadequate. It suffers the same metaphysical unease – a distrust of metaphysics as a closed system. However, the Stranger still offers up a prayer. That he does so, and that the prayer consists largely of questions, seems to open the possibility of some kind of transcendence.

Spöksonatan (The Ghost Sonata)

The Ghost Sonata continues one of the main themes of the previous Chamber Play, *The Burnt House*. The characters are all linked by a karmic web whose warp and weft is made of crime and deceit. It also bears a strong relation to both *A Dream Play* and some of Strindberg's pre-Inferno naturalistic dramas. Like *A Dream Play* it moves from naïve innocence to disillusionment, opposing another vision of cosmic order to the penal and perhaps infernal drudgery of everyday living. Strindberg also ends *The Ghost Sonata*, as he does *A Dream Play*, with a vision. Scene 2 reworks elements of both *The Father* and *Miss Julie*, two of Strindberg's great naturalistic dramas – the father who has unwittingly raised another man's child; the struggle for mental domination; killing another by the power of suggestion – but in such a different atmosphere that this amounts to a reassessment of these earlier works.

Strindberg originally subtitled the play 'kama loka', a term he derived from HP Blavatsky. Kama Loka is a post-mortem state that Blavatsky equates with limbo and Hades.³⁷⁴ It is a semi-material place inhabited for a time by the newly deceased, as they await a second death, this time the death of the baser part of the personality. Strindberg was very probably thinking of kama loka as this world. Certainly the play is full of phantoms, both literal ghosts and a ghoulish set of characters, one of them a mummy, who appear to exist in a kind of living death.

The play is structured as follows: in scene 1, the Student (Arkenholz) having spent the night binding up wounds after a house collapsed, meets the Old Man (Hummel), a wheelchair-bound cripple, who promises to get the Student into the house that seems to the latter a paradise. Along the way, we learn that the Student's father was in debt to Hummel, and had resented him bitterly. Hummel appears to be rather sinister, binding others to him (like his servant Johansson) and playing with their destiny. However he is terrified of a phantom milkmaid that only the Student can see. We learn that Hummel's ex-fiance inhabits the house, as does his ex-lover whose statue can be seen through the mirror. In fact the involuted relations between Hummel and the occupants are so complex as to defy sorting out entirely. Hummel arranges for the Student to sit next to the Colonel and his daughter at the opera, mainly as a way of inveigling himself into the house via the Student. In scene 2, Hummel confronts the household, and in a terrifying show of strength strips the Colonel of everything he possesses, including his family name and his rank. Having gained a total ascendancy over the Colonel, the Mummy (in fact Hummel's mentally deranged ex-lover who has lived in a cupboard for the last twenty years) proceeds to strip Hummel, revealing that

³⁷⁴ HP Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy* (Theosophical University Press Online Edition, <http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/key/key-9.html>) Section 9

he lured a young girl out onto the ice one winter, because she could incriminate him, and murdered her. This was the Milkmaid whose ghost so terrified Hummel in scene 1. The Mummy reduces Hummel to an automaton, tells him to enter the cupboard in which she has lived, and orders him to hang himself with the rope he finds there.

They draw a Japanese death screen in front of the cupboard as Hummel dies. Scene 3 involves mainly the Student and the Young Lady. It begins with idealistic exchanges and young love, but quickly sours, particularly after a brief exchange with the Cook, a female counterpart of Hummel. A sense of life's drudgery rapidly stifles their love, and the scene ends with a desperate appeal for salvation from the Student as the Young Lady dies, again behind the death screen.

As with the other *Chamber Plays*, the drama is intimately involved with the building it takes place in and around. Like both *The Storm* and *The Burnt House*, the house in *The Ghost Sonata* represents the world, and all the characters in scene 1 imagine with its apparent beauty and the elegant people inside, it must contain a paradise. Even in the stage directions, Strindberg hints at what is to come, describing it as a "husfasad", fasad having the same double-meaning as the English façade.

The play quickly creates an uncanny atmosphere, mixing the realistic, the fantastic and the grotesque. The play opens on a Sunday morning with Hummel in his wheelchair reading a newspaper while a Milkmaid washes her hands and gets a drink from the public fountain. The Student enters looking dishevelled and has to persuade the horrified Milkmaid to part with the scoop and let him drink. We learn just after this that Hummel could not see the Milkmaid, but reacts with horror when he hears the Student's description of her. Then there is the ghost of the dead Consul, so vain

even in death that he comes out of the house to count his wreaths and check if the flag is flying at half-mast. And there are strains in the otherwise realistic fabric of the play. Just after Hummel introduces himself to the Student, he tells him that he once had a friend who always mispronounced window (in Swedish, *fönster*) in a particular way (as 'funster'), and that the Student is the only other person he has ever heard who does the same. Hummel says this apparently in order to find out if the Student is related to his old friend (which he is – the Student is his son), but the point here is that the Student has not yet said the word 'fönster'. This has puzzled a number of readers, but it suggests various possibilities. It implies, perhaps, that Hummel is already well-aware of who the Student is, but is using this to inveigle his way into the latter's life. It also has a symbolic importance.³⁷⁵ Near the end of scene 1, Johansson tells the student that Hummel "breaks into houses, crawls in through the window, plays with people's destiny, kills his enemies and never forgives."³⁷⁶ So at the beginning of the scene, Hummel enters the Student's life through a window and starts meddling with his destiny.

The characters are all linked to each other in a kind of web, and typically for Strindberg the strands of this web are made of secrets, deceptions and crimes. The Student's father and Hummel were involved with each other, although, as we learn that what Hummel says about this is lies, the exact nature of it remains obscure. At any rate it seems to involve unpaid debts. The Dark Lady is the illegitimate daughter of the dead Consul and the Doorman's wife, as a consequence of which the Doorman got his job. Hummel bound his servant, Johansson, to him by discovering that the latter had committed a crime – or as Johansson calls it, "a blunder." Instead of

³⁷⁵ Egil Törnqvist points this out in *Strindbergian Drama*, pp. 228-9

³⁷⁶ Strindberg, *Skrifter*, vol. 12, p. 334

handing Johansson to the police, Hummel made him his slave. All this happens in the first scene, and it seems to embody a very cynical view of humanity. However, it establishes two important things – the Student's essential goodness, and Hummel's sinister manipulation of others. The Student enters, as we have seen, looking dishevelled, and the Milkmaid (whom we do not yet know to be a phantom) reacts with horror, apparently suspecting the student of a night of debauchery. Finally the Student has to explain that he has been binding up wounds all night at the house that collapsed the previous evening. This immediately makes the Student a sympathetic character, but what is important here also is the register of the Swedish.³⁷⁷ It switches between formal and informal in a way that is hard to render in modern English, in part because Swedish at that time still made a distinction between "you" and "thou" ("ni" and "du"). There is for instance a switch in tone when the student says

Jag är orakad, jag vet det ... Giv mig en dryck vatten, flicka, ty jag förtjänar
det!³⁷⁸

I am unshaved, I know ... Give me a drink of water, girl, for I have earned it!

The second part has in Swedish an elevated, almost Biblical tone – partly from the rhythm and partly the vocabulary (using the more formal *giv* instead of *ge*, for example). This is quite deliberate. The Student goes on "jag har förbundit sårade och vakat över sjuka hela denna natt." Again the tone is elevated – he has "bound up wounds and watched over the sick all this night." As well as imbuing the Student with stature, it also refers to the parable of the good Samaritan who tended the man set upon by robbers and "bound up his wounds" (Luke 10:34). He is innocent, and

³⁷⁷ This point, and the salient points of the discussion that follows, I owe to Törnqvist, *Strindbergian Drama*, pp. 231-233

³⁷⁸ Strindberg, *Skrifter*, vol.12, p. 329

despite being a Sunday-child who can see what others cannot, he is also, like Indra's daughter in *A Dream Play*, naïve.

We see this as Hummel works his way into the Student's life. We see how easily he persuades the Student that his father owed Hummel a debt of gratitude for bailing him out financially, thereby making the Student also beholden to him. Hummel is not interested in money, but in making others do his will, and so he tells the student "if you do me small services, I am well-paid."³⁷⁹ A little later Hummel places his hand on the Student and starts to drain the life out of him, causing the Student to cry out "Let go of my hand, you're taking away my power, you're making me cold, what is it you want?"³⁸⁰ His manipulation of others drains them of independent will, as we have already seen with Johansson. In fact Johansson says of him "he is like a horse thief at a human fair, he steals people, in many different ways."³⁸¹ He always makes use of the police, befriending them and then pumping them for information. He is malicious, sinister, manipulative, and he dominates everyone. In scene 2 he uses this to destroy the Colonel without compunction. In fact scene 2, despite its horror film trappings, strongly resembles some of Strindberg's naturalistic plays. As a believer in the scientific pretensions of naturalism he writes in these earlier plays in accord with psychological theories, albeit idiosyncratic ones, in a way that after the *Inferno* crisis he did not. These ideas were mainly associated with a battle of wills, which seemed inevitable whenever two people spent any time together, and which would eventually result in victory for one, defeat for the other. In his essay 'Soul Murder (Apropos Rosmersholm)', Strindberg explains this psychological version of the survival of the fittest: that whereas people once fought physically, they must now resort to more

³⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 330

³⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 332

³⁸¹ Ibid., p. 334

subtle and civilized means of killing each other.³⁸² The result may not be physical death, but a paralysis of the will. Strindberg expands on this theme in a thinly disguised autobiographical story, 'The Battle of the Brains'. Discussing the susceptibility of the mind to suggestion, he states "...suggestion is only the stronger brain's struggle with, and victory over, a weaker mind, and ... this procedure is applied unconsciously in daily life."³⁸³ After a struggle of wills between the narrator and his young travelling companion, the narrator trumpets his victory: "I laughed with a sense of superiority, because I know that it is my powerful mind that activates his powers of locomotion, and that I have hypnotised him so that he suffers from the hallucination that it is he who sets me in motion ... I have him under my gaze all day long, and I drip my thoughts into his brain in the form of well-crafted sentences."³⁸⁴ This domination of others by the stronger-willed, even to the point of activating others' "powers of locomotion" resembles Hummel's relationship with everyone around him. At the end of scene 1 he even persuades a group of beggars to pull his wheelchair like a chariot, literally commanding their powers of locomotion. This becomes even more apparent when we look at scene 2, especially in comparison with the dramas that Strindberg wrote in his naturalistic period.

Scene 2 takes place inside the house, and opens with an exchange between Johansson and Bengtsson, the butler, on the hellish life inside the house that seemed from the outside a paradise. This includes a satirical description of the occupants' daily "ghost-supper": "They drink tea and don't say a word, or the colonel talks away by himself; and then they nibble on biscuits, all at the same time, so that it sounds like

³⁸² Strindberg, *Selected Essays*, pp. 64 - 72

³⁸³ Ibid., p. 25

³⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 39

rats in the attic."³⁸⁵ Hummel sneaks in on crutches, and confronts the Mummy, who at first talks like a parrot. He tells her he has come for his child, the daughter they had together (although her husband, the Colonel, believes the child is his). It appears that Hummel seduced the Mummy in revenge for the Colonel seducing his fiancé. Hummel has come to exact revenge against the Colonel and the Mummy appeals to Hummel to spare him. Hummel refuses. When the Colonel enters we learn that Hummel has bought up his debts, and with smooth menace he reduces the Colonel to the state of a slave.

Colonel: [...] What do you want now?

Hummel: I want to be paid, in one way or another.

Colonel: In what way?

Hummel: Very simply – let's not talk about money – just tolerate me in your house, as a guest!³⁸⁶

Hummel demands that the Colonel fires Bengtsson, pointing out that he owns everything in the house and may dictate the Colonel's domestic arrangements. Within a few lines, Hummel is tyrannizing the Colonel, but he does not stop there. The Colonel attempts to retain some dignity by saying that his coat of arms and his good name still belong to him:

Hummel: No, not even that! (Pause) You are not an aristocrat!

Colonel: You should be ashamed!

Hummel: If you read this extract from the College of Arms, you will see that the family whose name you bear has been extinct for a hundred years.³⁸⁷

³⁸⁵ Strindberg, *Skrifter*, vol. 12, p. 335

³⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 338

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

The Colonel is forced to concede the truth of what Hummel says, and hands over his ring. But Hummel goes on mercilessly to prove that the Colonel is not even a Colonel: he had received his commission in the American voluntary service, "but after the Cuban war and the reorganization of the army all such titles were withdrawn..."³⁸⁸ Even this is not enough. Hummel goes on "take off your wig and look in the mirror, but take out your teeth first and shave your moustache, have Bengtsson loosen your corset, and we will see if a certain servant XYZ doesn't recognize himself; he who used to scrounge food in a certain kitchen..."³⁸⁹ Hummel utterly destroys the Colonel, forcing him to acknowledge that everything about him is humbug and reducing him to nothing. In this battle of the brains, Hummel has won a devastating victory.

As we have seen, Hummel is the biological father of the Colonel's daughter, and Hummel goes on to destroy the Colonel. This echoes the plot of *The Father*, one of Strindberg's naturalistic works from before his Inferno crisis, in which the eponymous father, a Captain in the army, is destroyed by his wife Laura. Laura accomplishes this by driving the Captain out of his mind with the suggestion that she has been unfaithful, and that their daughter is not in fact his. The details are so similar that the echo must be deliberate. Here however the tone is different. In "The Battle of the Brains" the protagonist takes a savage pleasure in the contest. He has a zest for life, however brutal it is. *The Father*, too, proceeds with a raw emotional violence, and not without a certain pleasure in battle. In *The Ghost Sonata*, the battle comes to seem both terrible and ruthless.

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

³⁸⁹ Ibid.

There are further echoes of Strindberg's naturalistic work, both in Hummel's pontificating and in his final undoing at the hands of the Mummy. Having reduced the Colonel to pliant servitude, Hummel sits in on the ghost-supper and dominates the company. He wishes everyone to be silent, because

silence cannot hide anything ... although words can; I read the other day that different languages really came about among primitive people in order to hide one tribe's secrets from another.³⁹⁰

That language should be a means of deception, not communication, in order to protect ourselves from others fits perfectly with Strindberg's earlier ideas on soul murder and domination of others by suggestion, in other words a brutal and ruthless struggle for survival. The parallel with Strindberg's naturalistic work is further suggested by Hummel's demise. Just as Hummel stripped the Colonel, so the Mummy now strips Hummel. She points out that Hummel is a thief of people, who killed the Consul with debt-notes and bound the Student with a fictitious debt owed by his father. She then calls in Bengtsson to explain the blackest point in Hummel's past. Hummel, panicking, begs the Mummy to stop. The Milkmaid appears in the hallway, seen only by the terrified Hummel, as Bengtsson comes in and explains his past:

He scrounged food from my kitchen for two whole years [...] he sat out there like a vampire and sucked all the goodness out of the house, and we became like skeletons.³⁹¹

Here too Hummel had gained total ascendancy over the occupants of a house and proceeded to plague them. Bengtsson goes on to reveal that under an assumed name in Hamburg, Hummel had lured a girl onto the ice in order to drown her, because she had witnessed one of his crimes.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 339

³⁹¹ Ibid., p. 340

Having stripped Hummel as Hummel stripped the Colonel, the Mummy tenderly kills him. She passes her hand over his face, a gesture perhaps suggesting hypnotism, and takes his debt-papers and will off him. She strokes his back and, repeating Bengtsson's line from beginning of the scene, says "Parrot! Is Jacob there?" Hummel starts babbling and squawking like a parrot, as the Mummy did earlier. The Mummy then tells Hummel "Get up and go into the cupboard where I sat for twenty years and wept for our misdeed – There's a rope in there like the one which you used to strangle the Consul, and which you were going to use to strangle your benefactor ... Go!"³⁹² Hummel goes into the cupboard, a death screen is drawn in front of it, and Hummel hangs himself. Hummel loses his will and pliantly obeys the slight suggestion from the Mummy, as if he were hypnotized. He even, with her prompting, squawks like a parrot. She tells him to go into the cupboard, and again only drops the suggestion in his mind that he might hang himself, without actually saying it. *Miss Julie* ends in a very similar way to this scene. Jean plants the suggestion that Miss Julie should cut her throat. Shortly afterwards, as if in a trance, Julie takes a razor from Jean's hand. Again she seems to be under a hypnotic spell. Jean has won the battle of the brains, and subdued her will. The play ends with Julie going out to the woodshed with the razor in order to kill herself.

Now Strindberg's naturalistic drama has no overt ethical or religious agenda. It does not pass judgment on anyone. At most it occasionally indulges a taste for the Nietzschean superman, but more commonly it is morally neutral. We may be moved to pity for the characters, but the play depicts a struggle for survival that overrides

³⁹² Ibid.

purely ethical demands. In *The Ghost Sonata*, however, this unending conflict comes to betoken a life that resembles damnation. All the apparent beauty of the house, all the fine achievements and honours of those who inhabit it, turn out to be humbug. Everyone in it is guilty of secret crimes, with the exception of the Young Lady and the Student. And there is certainly no zest in the battle, in this civilized counterpart of nature red in tooth and claw. In fact the house's inhabitants all seem half-dead; they have become ghost-like. Although we may doubt that the Mummy is as innocent, or Hummel as guilty, as she implies, she regrets that they are as they are: "We are miserable people, we know it; we have broken laws and we have erred, like everyone; we are not what we seem, because we are basically better than ourselves, when we dislike our faults."³⁹³ It is the theme of salvation that scene 3 takes up.

Scene 3 sits somewhat oddly with the first two scenes. The dramatic action of the play begins in scene 1 and concludes in scene 2. The main action of the play therefore concludes before the final scene. Adding to this dislocation, the first two scenes take place on one day, while the third scene happens at least a few days later. It takes place mostly between the Student and the Young Lady, and begins with them expressing lyrical and idealistic ideas about life, before the entrance of the vampiric Cook, the female counterpart of Hummel. The idealism rapidly dissolves in bitterness and argument, and ends with the Young Lady's death.

The final scene is symbolically important, however. We have seen that the passage from life to death informs all the Chamber Plays. It is in this final scene that life and death confront each other. There are some very suggestive resemblances between *The*

³⁹³ Ibid.

Ghost Sonata, in particular, and the form of the Japanese Nô drama. The Japanese traditionally made a sharp division between two worlds: the natural and the supernatural; or this world and the next. Japanese temples and shrines are situated on the margin of civilization, placing them symbolically at the edge of this world – they inhabit the boundary between the two worlds. It is on this boundary that Nô, also, is situated.³⁹⁴ The Chamber Plays situate themselves in this same borderland, as the two paintings flanking the stage of the Intimate Theatre emphasized.³⁹⁵ Furthermore, the Nô combined ritual and drama. While the first part of a Nô play depicts a human situation, often one involving the transition from life to death, the second resolves this situation into a ritual. The first two scenes of *The Ghost Sonata* depict a state of suspension within a world that is made of deceitful appearances. The social pretences that scene 2 lays bare are of a piece with this. The final scene, as it ends, becomes ritualistic in the use of music, lighting and the rhythm of the language.³⁹⁶

The room is decked out with hyacinths and decorated in a “somewhat bizarre oriental style.”³⁹⁷ On the tiled stove sits a statue of Buddha with a shallot bulb in his lap, from which a stem has shot up, bearing a globe-like cluster of white star-flowers. This becomes the occasion for a sort of cosmic vision – at least the Student’s explanation of this image describes a cosmic harmony which, as in *A Dream Play*, comes to seem distant in the disillusionment that follows. In fact there is a hint of this already when the Student complains that although he loves flowers, their scent confuses his senses,

³⁹⁴ Kiyoshi Tsuchiya, “Nô and Purification: The Art of Ritual and Vocational Performance” in *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, vol. 34, No. 2, Fall 2001, p. 100

³⁹⁵ See above, p. 132

³⁹⁶ I do not claim any direct influence here from Nô. Nô has, however, ancient ritual roots, bearing resemblance with other historically and geographically separate traditions (see Tsuchiya, p. 95). As Strindberg was here thinking about mortality, it is perhaps not surprising if he hit upon a form that bears a resemblance to the dramatic forms of other cultures. At any rate, the similarities of theme and to some extent of structure are striking.

³⁹⁷ Strindberg, *Skriifter*, vol. 12, p. 341

deafens and dazzles him; it shoots poisoned arrows that make his heart sink and his head hurt. The hyacinth room with all its apparent beauty dulls the senses and poisons the Student, whom we have already seen to be an innocent and good-natured man. This recalls the Daughter's lines from *A Dream Play*, when she explains to the Poet that she has suffered most from "simply existing; to feel my sight weakened by an eye, my hearing dulled by an ear, and my thought, my bright airy thought bound in the fatty labyrinth of a brain."³⁹⁸ Like the honey in Porphyry's explanation of the cave of the nymphs, the hyacinths represent worldly pleasure. They appear beautiful and attractive, but their scent acts as a poison. It is significant, then, that the Young Lady lies dying in a room full of hyacinths. The statue of the Buddha then represents an apocalyptic hope: the transformation of the poisoned life, indeed the transformation of the world. As the Student says: "It is [] an image of the Cosmos ... That's why the Buddha sits with the bulb of the earth in his lap, brooding on it with his gaze in order to see it sprout upwards and transform itself into a heaven. – The poor earth will become heaven! That's what the Buddha is waiting for."³⁹⁹

This vision looks forward to a transformation of ugliness into beauty, of the earthy into the heavenly. But Strindberg as usual cannot let it stand like that. He must question it, even attack it, and so in the third scene this vision gives way to disillusionment. In the Swedish, this scene begins with the Student and the Young Lady talking to each other with the formal "ni", but just for a moment, when they reach an ecstatic togetherness, they both switch to the familiar "du" form:

Fröken: [] Vilkens tanke var det?

Studenten: Din!

³⁹⁸ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel*, p. 195

³⁹⁹ Strindberg, *Skrifter*, vol. 12, p. 341

Fröken: Din!⁴⁰⁰

The Young Lady: Whose thought was it?

The Student: Yours!

The Young Lady: Yours!

This ecstatic love changes almost within a breath to disillusionment. The Student asks why the Young Lady's parents (who can still be seen through a doorway) sit so quietly. She replies "[b]ecause they have nothing to say to each other, because the one does not believe what the other says. My father puts it like this: What's the point of talking, when in any case we can't fool each other?"⁴⁰¹ Again, language is used to conceal motives and fool enemies, but the two parents know each other too well to be fooled. This image of marriage, of two enemies too worn out to fight any more, is a bleak one. The Young Lady's parents do not have even the zest for battle that Edgar and Alice have in *Dance of Death*. The scene places side by side the fresh love of the Student and the Young Lady and the dreary silent defeat of the Young Lady's parents. In fact they are almost literally side by side, as the stage directions state that the parents can still be seen: the Colonel and the Mummy sit listless and silent. We see them after the great battles in which Strindberg had once delighted.

The verdict on his earlier naturalism seems grim, and all the more so in the depiction of domestic life that follows. The Cook enters, a female giant who "belongs to the vampire family Hummel."⁴⁰² She sucks the nourishment out of everything she cooks: "everything she touches loses its juice, it's as if she sucked it out with her eyes."⁴⁰³

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 341-2

⁴⁰² Ibid., p. 342

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

This is part of the great struggle depicted in Strindberg's naturalistic works. As the Cook replies, "You suck the juice out of us, and we out of you."⁴⁰⁴ This grim struggle is inherent in life, but here it is no longer the naturalism that "seeks out the points where the great battles are fought, [...] which delights in the struggle between natural forces."⁴⁰⁵ While the struggle between classes, the struggle between spouses, the battle of wills in the previous scene, are the condition of life, this life now seems a brutal prison. Up to this point, the play is tragic rather than cynical. The moment of ecstatic closeness between the Student and the Young Lady is not denied, but it gives way very fast to the struggle and drudgery involved in living. Life itself defeats love. The Student tells the Young Lady "I would shrink from nothing to win your hand," only to say a few moments later "Do you know what I think of you now?"⁴⁰⁶

The Student seeks either a salvation from or transformation of this life. The latter hope is expressed in the Buddha statue. At intervals throughout scene 3, the Student cries out in despair "Cor in aethere", appealing to a "heart in the heavens." This need for a salvific escape from the world goes along with a conviction that the world is false and deceitful. In part, he wants to escape a world of appearance and illusion, into a world of the real. In the previous scene, first the Colonel and then Hummel were ruthlessly stripped. In scene 3, again, life is made up of unreliable appearances. The Cook serves up coloured water instead of gravy (she carries a Japanese flask with "scorpion-letters" on it – ie. a bottle of soy sauce). This act of deceit is emphasized further in the student's description of Hummel's funeral, which was "very solemn and beautiful."⁴⁰⁷ The service is conducted with great dignity by a priest who was

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 343

⁴⁰⁵ Strindberg, *Selected Essays*, p. 78

⁴⁰⁶ Strindberg, *Skrifter*, vol. 12, p. 343

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

arrested the next day for embezzling church funds. The funeral procession was led by an old friend of Hummel's, who it turns out had "loved" Hummel's son (the ambiguity is present in the Swedish), and from whom Hummel had borrowed money (implying perhaps that Hummel had extorted it by blackmail). In other words the whole solemn beautiful ceremony is humbug. Companionship also, for the most part, amounts to nothing. The Student relates how his father had acquired a circle of acquaintances, "whom for brevity's sake he called friends."⁴⁰⁸ One day, the father held a party, and tired of wearing a polite mask he said exactly what he thought, "and in a long speech he stripped the entire company, one after another, exposing all their falseness [...], and wished them all to go to Hell!"⁴⁰⁹

This of course resembles scene 2, with Hummel's stripping of the Colonel. Yet cynical as all this seems, these hypocrisies and illusion are absolutely necessary for life to continue. The Student himself seems to realize this when he says "I sometimes get a violent longing to say everything I think; but I know that the world would collapse if people were really honest."⁴¹⁰ And indeed, according to his account, his father ended his days in a madhouse, while Hummel is himself undone by the exposure of his secrets. Strindberg shows his skill as a satirist in his description of the ghost-supper, and again in the Student's description of the father's speech and Hummel's funeral. Yet he also finds that hypocrisy and self-delusion are essential to survival. Thus Hummel's stripping of the Colonel is an act of terrifying violence. We can only feel pity as the Colonel, however pompous, is reduced to nothing. And the Colonel himself is not innocent – he had seduced Hummel's fiancé. Hummel had some reason to feel resentful.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 344

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., p. 343

No wonder the Student expresses such disillusionment at the end of the play: "There is something rotten here! And I thought it was paradise, when I first saw you come in here."⁴¹¹ The play still has in the background the sort of Platonic, if not in fact Gnostic, view of the world that lies behind *A Dream Play*. The house appears beautiful from outside, but within it everything is deceptive, and the lives of the inhabitants are blighted, not least by the necessity to harm each other in order to survive. As Strindberg said of *A Dream Play*, the hardest aspect of life is "to do others harm, which you are forced to if you want to live."⁴¹² This shift of attitude is the fundamental change between Strindberg's naturalistic drama and this one. The context of the drama here is mythic, and the mood one of regret that life should be this way. The drama is not so much interested in the individual characters, but in their situation. All are essentially guilty, all are trapped in this house where deception and guile are absolutely necessary. We saw earlier that Strindberg's naturalistic work eschewed ethical judgments. *The Ghost Sonata* is not really ethical either, even though it is so concerned with crime and guilt. All the characters are caught in the same net. To this extent, the Mummy's claim to moral superiority over Hummel is suspect. She places all the blame for their misdeeds on him, and she takes her revenge. No wonder, either, that the Student at the end invokes Jesus as liberator:

Jesus Christ went down into hell, which was his wandering on the Earth, into this madhouse, this prison-house, this mortuary the Earth; and the madmen killed him when he tried to free them, but the bandit they let go [...] ⁴¹³

Salvation, if it is to be found anywhere, lies in freeing oneself from a fallen world. Thus the Mummy can claim to be better than Hummel, only to the extent that she

⁴¹¹ Ibid., p. 344

⁴¹² *Brev*, vol. 14, p. 187

⁴¹³ Strindberg, *Skrifter*, vol. 12, p. 344

recognizes and regrets her own shortcomings. To this extent, she is, as she puts it, better than she is. As the Young Lady dies, the Student tells her "The liberator is coming! [...] may you be greeted by a sun that doesn't burn, in a house without dirt, by friends without shame, by a love without flaw."⁴¹⁴

It is towards the end of this third scene that the play becomes ritualistic, but this ritualism becomes apparent as all the Student's illusions have vanished:

And I thought this was paradise the first time I saw you enter here [...] I saw a Colonel who was no Colonel, I had a noble benefactor who was a bandit and had to hang himself.

Och jag trodde det var paradiset, när jag såg er inträda här första gången [...] jag såg en överste som icke var någon överste, jag hade en ädel välgörare som var en bandit och fick hänga sig.⁴¹⁵

The Student has reverted here to addressing the Young Lady by the formal *er* rather than the informal *dig*. The formal register signals the shift that gradually takes place from this moment into a ritualistic mode. The repetitions and parallelisms of the following lines take on a quasi liturgical formality. It is in this formal register that he notes the failure of sight (and by extension of his senses) – that what he perceived as a paradise, and everything in it, was in fact fraudulent. The liturgical formality becomes explicit when the Student exclaims "Sursum Corda"⁴¹⁶ ("Lift up your hearts!"), the opening of the Mass. He begs the Young Lady

Försök en gång till att slå eld och purpur ur den gyllne harpan ... försök, jag ber, jag befäller på mina knän ...

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ "Lift up your hearts!" Ibid., p. 344

Try once more to strike fire and purple from your golden harp ... try I beg
you, I command you on my knees...⁴¹⁷

The formality of the language is evident here even in English, and while a whole play consisting of such lines would quickly become very tedious, here it endows the Student with a dignity that he also revealed in scene 1, as we have seen. By uttering the "sursum corda" he has taken on the role of a priest, a role reflected in the formal dignity of his language. As a priest, he attempts to mediate between two worlds, yet he finds he cannot. Taking up the harp himself, he finds it will not make a sound. To his despair he finds that love is poisoned, as is the world:

To think that the most beautiful flowers are so poisonous, are the most
poisonous, the curse rests on the whole of creation and life.⁴¹⁸

The flowers, we have seen, stand for worldly existence, as they stand for love and for sex. A flower quickly withers after blossoming, its form giving way to formlessness. They stand, then, for a life which is transitory, and for a beauty that blinds and sickens. But the Student also finds himself waking up here. He begins to distance himself from his perceptions, declaring

there are poisons that deaden your vision, and poisons that open the eyes – I
must have been born with the second kind, because I cannot see the ugly as
beautiful or call what is evil good, I cannot!⁴¹⁹

The Student goes on to describe, in the lines quoted earlier, Christ's incarnation as a descent into a madhouse. Here, again, the Student's speech takes on a quasi-liturgical formality in the rhythmic repetitions of his speech: Jesus' descent into the world was a descent into hell, into

⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid.

dårhuset, tukthuset, bårhuset jorden⁴²⁰

Rendering this into literal English it becomes awkward: the madhouse, the prison-house, the mortuary-house the earth." The repetition of "huset" emphasizes the rhythmic formality of the lines, giving it the quality of an incantation.

The Student, we have seen, has become aware of the deceptive nature of his own senses. This suggests that *The Ghost Sonata* is, like *A Dream Play*, beginning to function as Platonic theatre.⁴²¹ The lines analyzed above cease to register only as dialogue. They become a meta-theatrical element, emphasizing the artificiality of the fiction portrayed on stage, and by analogy the fictive nature of perception. The painting that hung beside the stage of the Intimate Theatre would have reinforced this meta-theatrical element. The actor playing the Student, if this aspect were to be emphasized in performance, would then take on a role exceeding that of playing a character – he would take, for the duration of this final passage, the role of a kind of priest.

Returning to the analogy with Nô, the purpose of the performance, as of the acting, is the transformation of ugliness into beauty. As Tsuchiya puts it, "the actor's task is to become a flower – that is, to place himself at the meeting point between the two worlds, to embody a lingering passion, transform it into a flower, then to dissolve it into darkness, which completes the tragic but purifying transition."⁴²² The ending of *The Ghost Sonata* moves into this linking of two worlds, as the harp's strings begin to sound and the stage fills with white light. The Student sings the "Song of the Sun,"

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

⁴²¹ See above, pp. 100-107

⁴²² Tsuchiya, "Nô: the Art of Ritual and Vocational Performance", p. 102

which intimates a vision of an invisible world. Finally, he pronounces a blessing on the Young Lady as she dies:

You poor little child, child of this world of illusions, guilt, suffering and death;
this world of eternal change, disappointment and pain! May the Lord of
Heaven have mercy on you on your journey...

Du stackars lilla barn, barn av denna villornas, skuldens, lidandets och dödens
värld; den eviga växlingens, missräkningarnes och smärtans värld; Himmelens
Herre vare dig nådig på färden...⁴²³

Again, a literal translation into English sounds awkward, but in Swedish it has a melancholy dignity emphasized by the repetition of sounds ("villornas, skuldens, lidandets värld") and the slow rhythm of the words. This blessing recapitulates the Student's earlier perception of the world as false, but here the disillusionment and pain has been transformed into elegiac beauty: it has become a flower.

Like *Nô*, then, the play straddles two worlds and ends in a transformation: from life to death, and from disillusionment to tragic calm. But whereas *Nô* issues in a reconciliation with mortality, with the inevitable dissolution of all forms into formlessness, *The Ghost Sonata* ends in an apocalyptic hope. The Student addresses the Young Lady (here he switches again to the intimate *du* form):

[...] sleep without dreams, and when you awaken ... may you be greeted by a
sun that does not burn, in a home without dirt, by friends without shame, by a
love without flaw.⁴²⁴

He then addresses the Buddha:

⁴²³ Strindberg, *Skrifter*, vol. 12, p. 344

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

You wise, mild Buddha, you that sit there and wait for a heaven to grow up
out of the earth, lend us patience in the trial, purity of will, that hope may not
come to shame.⁴²⁵

This hope is represented, symbolically, by the star-shaped flower growing from the
bulb in the Buddha statue's lap. It is a hope that the poisonous sweetness of the
flowers decking the hyacinth room will be transformed. This vision is easier to read
than the one that concludes *A Dream Play*, yet here again Altizer becomes helpful.
For if he does nothing else, he makes clear that in the apocalyptic moment, everything
that we know as the world, as everything we know as God, dies. Only in this utterly
dark apocalyptic moment, the apocalyptic moment of the death of God, is God born.
It is in this darkness that a new world is also born. If nothing else, *A Ghost Sonata*
enacts the death of illusions, a literal disillusionment, and this moment of utter
disillusionment is celebrated as holy.

I have suggested an analogy between *A Ghost Sonata* and Nô drama as a way of
bringing to light the ritualistic elements present with particular force at the end of act
3. These elements include the language, which moves from colloquial to formal,
rhythmic and repetitive. They also include the use of music and light: the whispering
of the harp strings, the recital of the Song of the Sun and the stage filling with white
light. All these elements disrupt the surface of the theatrical illusion, moving theatre
away from the realistic and towards the liturgical – but a liturgy, it must be stressed,
outside the church as it is outside confessions and creeds. While *A Ghost Sonata*
opens the possibility of a move towards a sacred theatre, and theatre as sacred space,
it certainly does not explore this systematically or in any way exhaust it. Indeed,

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

Strindberg was perhaps only marginally aware of the possibility he was opening up here. But if we take this 'liturgical' potential seriously, it also makes tremendous demands on any actor performing in it. Nô theatre requires absolute dedication from its practitioners. The vocation of the Nô actor is "to continue transforming his ugliness throughout his life ... His task on the stage is to transform passion to beauty, and, in order for this to occur, he must face his own ugliness and transform it into the 'flower.'"⁴²⁶ This type of flower "is the result of rigorous, lifelong training."⁴²⁷ The Polish director Grotowski, when he was still working in the theatre, also discovered that the kind of drama he sought similarly demanded an almost monastic discipline. Thus he made demands on the private lives of his actors, even while away from the theatre. Debauchery, or even shortage of sleep, interferes with the particular intensity of concentration that Grotowski was seeking.⁴²⁸ Furthermore, he demanded that his actors show an attentive respect for their work, a respect that borders on "solemnity."⁴²⁹

The fact that this should take place in the secular theatre, not in a sacred site, is itself important. The play draws eclectically on images and ideas from both Christianity and Buddhism, but it takes place outside the confines of any particular tradition. If there is a ritual, let alone liturgical, dimension to the play, yet it seeks communion outside the church. It also contains an inherent tension. The ending contains, like the whole play, an absence. The play is full of deceptive appearances, surfaces that lack substance. So the ending too indicates an absence, and this in part gives it its elegiac tone. This world is the world of "illusions, guilt, suffering and death." It is eternally

⁴²⁶ Tsuchiya, "Nô: the Art of Ritual and Vocational Performance," p. 102

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

⁴²⁸ Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, p. 217

⁴²⁹ Ibid., p. 215

changing. The Student appeals to "[y]ou wise, mild Buddha, sitting there and waiting for a heaven to grow out of the Earth."⁴³⁰ Death itself is invisible: both Hummel and the Young Lady die out of sight, behind the Japanese death screen. There is here a longing for a world that is stable, permanent, and real, a world without suffering, but by the same token that world has not come.

Pelikanen (The Pelican)

More than any other Chamber Play, the dramatic technique of *The Pelican* resembles Strindberg's naturalistic drama. The play takes place entirely in one room. Its events happen over the course of an evening. The dramatis personae, particularly the Mother and the Son-in-law are closer to three-dimensional characters than flattened 'roles'. The characters fit the naturalistic mould to the extent that they can be seen as the products of heredity and environment. In short, the play adheres to the unities of time and place, and obeys the causal narrative logic that is sometimes shaky and sometimes completely abjured in other post-Inferno plays. It shares with the other *Chamber Plays*, however, an investigation of guilt and like them engages most deeply not with the motivation of individual characters but the situation they all find themselves in. Like the other *Chamber Plays*, it uses the motif of a house, in which the characters are imprisoned and condemned to live their lives.

A Return to Naturalism?

While a play like *Miss Julie* is in a sense quite programmatic (ostensibly demonstrating a set of 'scientific' ideas), and the *Chamber Plays* are as it were empirical, there is a resemblance, particularly in *The Pelican*, to the stage technique

⁴³⁰ Strindberg, *Skrifter*, vol.12, p. 344

Strindberg developed in the 1890s. *The Pelican* is a compact piece of drama. It opens without preamble or explanation and flings the audience into the play, the background gradually becoming clear in the course of the action. The setting is realistic. Indeed, like *Miss Julie*, *The Pelican* takes place entirely in one room, in this case a drawing room rather than a kitchen. *The Pelican* also pivots around human conflicts in a way that *To Damascus*, for example, does not. Essentially, it depicts the conflict between a widow and her children. Strindberg puts these techniques to very different use, however, in this play. Essential to the naturalistic project (and at least in Strindberg's case it was a project, as the preface to *Miss Julie* makes clear) was the aim of making literature scientific. Strindberg attempts to establish his naturalistic credentials in the preface to *Miss Julie* by stating that he took his plot from a real incident, and produces a theory of character motivation that was in part a riposte to criticism from Zola. Thus his 'colourless' characters cannot simply be categorised by one dominant trait. They are not fixed and their motivations are complex and multiple, and often half-unconscious. Some of these are connected with upbringing, some with heredity. Thus Julie is weakened by her aristocratic sense of honour and her conscience, while Jean's lack of conscience makes him stronger. In fact, Strindberg describes him as the founder of a new species, "someone in whom the process of differentiation may be observed."⁴³¹ Along with these pretensions to scientific rigour went a change in the relationship of the audience to the stage, as we have seen.⁴³² The audience of the future, Strindberg suggests, will observe the action with analytical detachment, obtaining a purely intellectual pleasure. To this end, the ideal theatrical space should consist of a small stage and a small auditorium, with the audience plunged into total darkness. This in fact closely resembles the conditions

⁴³¹ Strindberg, *Miss Julie and Other Plays*, p. 61

⁴³² See above, pp. 70-1

realised twenty years later in the Intimate Theatre. Turning back to *The Pelican*, the characters are in a quite simplistic sense a product of environment and upbringing. The son is always hungry; however much he eats he is never full. This has come about because he was bottle-fed as a baby, and later suffered neglect from his parsimonious mother, who would only buy the cheapest and worst food available. He has grown up in a freezing house, and he is always cold. The physical coldness, constantly referred to, also signifies the Mother's emotional coldness. She did not breastfeed her children, nor did she nourish them, and so the son is frail and stammers and the daughter, despite her twenty years, is not full-grown. This is not worked out with anything like the same detail as the depiction of character in *Miss Julie*, yet the very fact that we can investigate these sorts of questions about the make-up and motivation of the characters signals a change from *A Dream Play*, and even from the other *Chamber Plays*. However, despite the return to a much greater level of realism, this drama, rather than demonstrating a "scientific" thesis, explores guilt, sin and evil. It is in a broad sense a metaphysical drama, and the background to it is again mythic.

A 'Battle of the Brains'

We have already seen how Strindberg's earlier theories on a battle of wills, or 'battle of the brains' as he called it, influenced *The Ghost Sonata*.⁴³³ In this battle, the stronger will controls the weaker by suggestion, and in the course of the fight "souls ... get 'ideas', or suggestions as they are called, from one another, from the milieu ... and from objects."⁴³⁴ In *Miss Julie* physical objects – Jean's razor, her absent father's boots and the servant bell – become the medium for thought-transference and suggestion. There are suggestions of a similar influence exercised by the possessions

⁴³³ See above, pp. 160-1

⁴³⁴ Strindberg, *Miss Julie and Other Plays*, p. 60

of the Mother's recently-deceased husband in *The Pelican*. First of all she cannot bear the sight of the uncovered sofa on which her husband died. Then she hears footsteps outside the room when no-one is there. The Mother reacts with unease, entering while a storm is blowing to find the rocking-chair moving. She shows signs of an uneasy conscience. There seems to be more to it than that, however. With the Son-in-Law, Axel, with whom she seems suspiciously close, she discovers a hidden letter from her dead husband to her son, accusing her of murder:

The Mother: Just think, he writes to his son that he died murdered.

The Son in Law: There are many ways to commit murder ... and your way had the advantage of not being punishable under the law.⁴³⁵

In Strindberg, this means the kind of murder by suggestion in *Miss Julie* and, especially here, *The Father*. The attempt to suppress the letter then becomes a struggle to retain power over the household, a power that the son-in-law is already challenging. He threatens to drive her out or make her their maid. To retain her influence, she tears up the letter and puts the pieces into the tiled stove⁴³⁶, intending to burn them. When the son finds the pieces, he uses them to open his sister, Gerda's, eyes and turns her against their mother.

The most peculiar aspect of this is that the struggle should take place between the mother and the leftovers of her dead husband. The play implies that the house is haunted. The Mother hears footsteps outside the room more than once. She seems to think the letter is the product of a ghostly hand, commenting "To think, he's got up and he's talking from the grave – he isn't dead!"⁴³⁷ The father's letter to his son

⁴³⁵ Strindberg, *Skrifter*, vol. 12, p. 352

⁴³⁶ The old-fashioned way of heating homes in Sweden. A 'stove' covered in white tiles, with metal doors, in which birchwood was burned.

⁴³⁷ Strindberg, *Skrifter*, vol. 12, p. 352

reinforces this impression, stating as it does that the father "died murdered", as if he had somehow written it after dying. Of course this is capable of interpretation. It may be the 'half-reality' of *The Ghost Sonata*, but it is also capable of a naturalistic interpretation – that the Mother's conscience torments her. Her hearing of steps, her dislike of the uncovered sofa, her complaint about the smell of spruce twigs (a traditional funcrary decoration in Sweden), her horror at the sight of the moving rocking-chair attest to her sense of guilt. The Son seems deliberately to play on this when, hearing his mother approach, he gets up from the rocking chair, which continues to rock until she enters. It produces an effect of horror on the Mother.

The point at which this battle of the brains comes together with the dream plays is in the characters' own sense that they are sleepwalking through life. Their will, for the most part, does not seem to be their own, though at points of particular pain they may briefly 'wake up'. Thus when the son reads the terrible contents of his father's letter he says "Now I am waking from my sleep."⁴³⁸ This is vital to the play's examination of sin and evil, which we will turn to in a moment.

The Pelican as Mythic Drama

The action of the play centers on a murdered father, who is never seen. The house is, or may be, haunted. The murdered man's son receives a possibly supernatural message from his father revealing that he has been murdered, and the son swears revenge. This begins to resemble Hamlet, especially when the Mother asks Gerda "your Uncle Viktor has proposed to me; what would you say, if I married again?"⁴³⁹ In fact the only purpose of this line seems to be to point up the resemblance. Uncle

⁴³⁸ Ibid., p. 355

⁴³⁹ Ibid., p. 360

Viktor plays no other part in the play, and is mentioned only here. The Mother's closest relationship is with her son-in-law, though even this turns sour. Why does Strindberg lay such stress on this resemblance? I believe it is in part the confrontation with responsibility and death that takes place in Hamlet. The dilemma Hamlet confronts in his "To be or not to be" soliloquy also confronts the characters in this play: whether to take their own lives to escape the world of troubles they inhabit. Strindberg found in Hamlet an echo of his own views on character, commenting "simple minds always talk about contradictions and inconsistencies, but everything that lives is compounded of elements that are not homogenous but have to be opposites in order to cohere ... Thus Hamlet himself is composed only of apparent contradictions: he is evil and good, hates and loves; he is cynical and dreamy, spiteful and indulgent, strong and weak, in one word: a human being, different every moment, as human beings are."⁴⁴⁰

The Mother is monstrous. She is one of Strindberg's vampires. In case we have not already picked this up by reference to her starving her children and draining everyone's vitality by her penny-pinching, the letter from her dead husband tells her son that "[s]he stole from the housekeeping, she made up bills, she bought the worst for the highest price, she ate in the kitchen in the morning and gave us the diluted, warmed-up remains [...] When our father discovered this, he warned her and she promised to improve, but she continued and made inventions using soya and cayenne pepper."⁴⁴¹ In other words, she behaves like the cook in *The Ghost Sonata*, who also dilutes and adulterates the food she has sucked the goodness out of, disguising the fact with soy sauce and paprika. And yet, we have seen, her conscience troubles her.

⁴⁴⁰ Strindberg, *Samlade Verk*, vol. 64, p. 68

⁴⁴¹ Strindberg, *Skrifter*, vol. 12, p. 355

More importantly, she cannot really be held responsible for her actions. We have already seen the effect of the children's upbringing, making both the Son and Gerda frail and underdeveloped. But the Mother herself is the product of a cruel upbringing. As she protests to her daughter, "Do you know anything about my childhood? Do you have any idea what a bad home I had, what evil I had to learn there? It seems to descend through the generation from above, but from whom? From the first parents, according to the children's books, and it seems to fit..."⁴⁴² In other words, they are all born into this situation and inherit the malice of their forebears, and therefore they cannot be held ultimately responsible. This is all the more so as the characters, as we have seen, for the most part find they have sleepwalked through their lives. The Mother's children themselves acknowledge this.

Now this comes back to something the Mother says at the beginning of the play. The servant, Margret, asks the Mother why she does not move. She replies "The landlord won't allow us to leave, and we can't move ourselves ..." ⁴⁴³ They find themselves trapped in the house. Indeed, the one room we see is cramped and closed-in, the consequent claustrophobia emphasized by the mother's first three lines, when she repeatedly commands "Shut the door!"⁴⁴⁴ This suggests a symbolic correlation between the apartment and the world. The symbol evokes again the neo-Platonic myth of the spirit's descent into the world, and more harshly Strindberg's own favourite trope of the world as a prison. One scholar suggests we read *The Pelican* as a companion piece to *The Storm*, written six months earlier, which reads in some

⁴⁴² Ibid., p. 361

⁴⁴³ Ibid., p. 347

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid.

ways as a bleak re-assessment of the earlier work.⁴⁴⁵ He thus points out that the protagonist of *The Storm* is not in the same way trapped within his apartment-building; indeed, as the play ends he declares he will soon leave it. *The Pelican*, then, is bleaker, as the tenants cannot leave. We saw that *The Storm* ultimately asserts the operation of a guiding Providence on the world. Such an assertion is, if implicitly then also unavoidably, inseparable from a justification of the goodness of both the world and the creator-God. The theistic implications of *The Pelican* are then much more troubling. This play is not atheist – the world does not suffer from God's absence or inexistence. Rather, the characters find that God has shut them in, imprisoned them within the world. The landlord will not let them leave the house and they lack the power of willing their own movement. Here in a terrifying *coincidentia oppositorum* God has become a demon. It recalls the Gnostic *Efterspel* to the verse edition of *Master Olof*.⁴⁴⁶ This imprisonment, and the sleepwalking of the characters through life, is the situation they are born into. Thus the Son tells the Mother "you went as if you were sleeping and couldn't be woken, so you couldn't change."⁴⁴⁷ The Mother 'wakes up' towards the end and finds her situation horrible.

This, again, resembles Hamlet, at least as Strindberg interpreted him. He says of Hamlet, "he is humanity, when it steps from childhood into life and finds everything quite different from what it had imagined. Hamlet is the alert youth, who discovers that the world is out of joint and feels himself called to put it right, and he despairs when he puts his shoulders to the rock and finds it is stuck fast."⁴⁴⁸ For Hamlet, the alternative is the sleep of death. For the characters in *The Pelican*, death means

⁴⁴⁵ Hans-Göran Ekman, *Villornas Värld: Studier i Strindbergs Kammarspel* (Uppsala: Gidlunds Förlag, 1997), p. 219

⁴⁴⁶ See above, p. 89

⁴⁴⁷ Strindberg, *Skrifter*, vol. 12, p. 358

⁴⁴⁸ Strindberg, *Samlade Verk*, vol. 64, p. 80

waking up from the sleep of life. Escape from the house means death, and the Mother attempts to escape by suicide when she prepares to jump through the window.

The play ends, like *A Dream Play*, in conflagration. The Son sets light to the house, and standing with his sister desperate for escape she pronounces "No! Everything must burn, otherwise we will never get out of here!"⁴⁴⁹ As they gradually succumb to the smoke, the brother and sister dream of summer in the countryside, in what appears to be a memory from their childhood.

This is the bleakest of the *Chamber Plays*, and also the most completely apocalyptic. *The Burnt House* makes a gloomy assessment of human life, but remains open to the possibility of transcendence. *The Ghost Sonata*, while apparently endorsing the naturalistic world-view of *Miss Julie* and *The Father*, also retains a hope that the world can become transformed. Of all these plays, *The Pelican* remains most resolutely bound within worldly existence. It ends without hope. The only liberation available to its characters is death.

CONCLUSION

In all the *Chamber Plays*, the characters are trapped within or bound to a house. The characters are also bound, rather unwillingly, to each other. In all cases the house suggests worldly existence. *The Storm* ends on an optimistic note, as it seems that the Gentleman's difficulties, and those of everyone else, can be confronted and dealt with – indeed, a beneficent Providence seems to be at work. The remaining *Chamber Plays* are bleaker. Here salvation, if it exists, seems immeasurably distant. The

⁴⁴⁹ Strindberg, *Skrifter*, vol. 12, p. 361

characters remain in a condition of bondage, and although some characters become aware of their situation, they can do nothing about it. *The Burnt House* and *The Ghost Sonata* do, however, hold out the possibility of transcendence. Indeed the latter ends on an aesthetic transformation of the fundamental ugliness of the house, but a transformation that is also a dissolution. If they open onto any kind of transcendence, it is one devoid of content. That is to say, they do not find a transcendent God, but they hint at a transcendent void.

As we have seen, the characters in the chamber plays exist in a state of suspension comparable to that of the Unknown in *To Damascus*. In general, they display a tension between meaningfulness and meaninglessness. It is thanks to the latter pole, meaninglessness, and the consequent sense of disorientation that these plays represent a sort of ur-absurdist drama. A comparison to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is revealing. In both cases, the senses are untrustworthy. Thus the apparent calm surrounding the apartment house in *The Storm* is fraudulent, the Stranger in *The Burnt House* discovers the double walls of his parents' house, and the Student in *The Ghost Sonata* finds that the apparent paradise of the Young Lady's apartment is in fact hellish. There is then a failure of the senses to identify or perceive correctly the world they open onto. In Beckett's *Godot*, similarly, perception continually fails. Thus, attempting to find the tree by which they were to meet Godot, Beckett's outcasts find themselves lost:

Vladimir: He said by the tree. (*They look at the tree.*) Do you see any others?

[]

Estragon: Looks more like a bush.

Vladimir: A shrub.

Estragon: A bush.

Vladimir: A-. What are you insinuating? That we've come to the
wrong place?⁴⁵⁰

Misperception in *Godot* goes hand in hand with miscommunication. Thus Estragon asks if it was that evening they were to meet Godot:

Vladimir: He said Saturday. (*Pause.*) I think.

Estragon: You think.

Vladimir: I must have made a note of it.

He fumbles in his pockets, bursting with miscellaneous rubbish.

Estragon: (*very insidious*) But what Saturday? And is it Saturday? Is it not
rather Sunday? (*Pause.*) Or Monday? (*Pause.*) Or Friday?⁴⁵¹

Communication and perception have been overwhelmed by doubt. In *Godot* there is no way to be sure of anything. Misunderstanding also mars communication in *The Chamber Plays*, although this theme is less developed in Strindberg. Thus, most obviously, Hummel in *The Ghost Sonata* demands silence, because words only serve to deceive others. As Ekman points out, the dialogue in the three latter *Chamber Plays* often becomes a source of deliberate deception – or alternatively a source of truths too painful to acknowledge, as when the Mother in *The Pelican* replies to Margret's complaints "I can't understand a word you're saying."⁴⁵²

⁴⁵⁰ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978) p. 14

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., p. 15

⁴⁵² Ekman, *Villornas Värld*, pp. 151-2; 193-6; 238-9

Language hides as much as it reveals and appearances lie. Words no longer remain fixed to their referents. Speech and perception have become problematic. The liturgical language of God as presence has also, therefore, become hollowed out.

All the plays discussed here contain an uncomfortable awareness of the void. *The Storm* closes off this awareness, finally, by asserting a direction and order to the world. The other plays are not so sanguine. The world as represented there is a world of illusion and deceit, distant (perhaps unreachably distant) from salvation. Thus the crucifix could be exchanged for a straightjacket. But these are still not atheistic. Rather, the awareness of emptiness is itself a religious moment.

To the side of the stage at the Intimate Theatre hung a reproduction of Böcklin's *Isle of the Dead*, the same image that ends *The Ghost Sonata*. Thus Strindberg declared, in the theatre's physical trappings, that this was to be a theatre of mortality and the passage from life to death. This opens the possibility of a sacred theatre.⁴⁵³ This possibility dominates the thinking of many subsequent theatrical practitioners. The awareness of the void also animates some of the best twentieth century drama from Pirandello to Pinter. Why should theatre become a vehicle for this? Why should religious performance not have remained within the church? Perhaps theatre is more comfortable with the language of absence, more readily accessible by Strindberg's day than the language of presence. In the conclusion, I explore some of these possibilities.

⁴⁵³ In fact, this could be regarded as theatre recapturing its roots. Western theatre has always had a relationship to the sacred, right back to ancient Greece when tragedies were performed as part of sacred festivals.

5. The Great Highway

Stora Landsägen ("The Great Highway") was Strindberg's final play, written in 1909, three years before his death. He seems to have written it quite consciously as a farewell to the theatre, describing it as his "avsked till livet och självdeklaration" ("farewell to life and self-declaration").⁴⁵⁴ As such, it contains attacks on a number of enemies and former friends, some of whom would have been well-known to a contemporary Swedish audience.⁴⁵⁵ The play as a whole changes quite drastically in tone about half-way through. Apart from the opening scene, the first half is a satire on humanity along the line of the ship of fools, at times reminiscent of vaudeville. It also contains, as noted, veiled attacks against a number of Strindberg's enemies. It is in scene four that the mood changes, and the play becomes a sombre meditation on mortality. Here I want to focus on those aspects of the play that most directly speak to my main theme, the paradoxical nature of the Christianity that these plays apparently embrace.

Scene one, "in the Alps," takes place on a narrow mountain path with a signpost in the background with one arm pointing upward, the other down. The play's protagonist, the Hunter, enters alone. He speaks in unrhymed verse, as he does for the rest of this scene, in a monologue that has heavy symbolic overtones. In his first line he asks "Where have I come to, and how far?"⁴⁵⁶ He declares that he wants to continue up the path, out of the world:

But this signpost is sticking out its arms,

⁴⁵⁴ Strindberg, *Samlade Verk*, vol. 62, p. 251. The term "självdeklaration" implies an audit, a kind of tax return for the almighty (and the public).

⁴⁵⁵ The Crematorium scene contains, for example, a very nasty attack on the recently deceased Gustaf af Geijerstam. Ibid., p. 250

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 105

As if it was warning me against the upward path!

A danger then, many dangers

On the path, that is steep and narrow!⁴⁵⁷

The Hunter has lived in the world, and found its bonds unbearable:

They bound me with their friendship,

[...]

Yes, there was warmth down there

[...]

Music and flowers, candles and glass.

But the warmth increased, and it became stifling -⁴⁵⁸

He complains that among society he could not maintain his independence. It threatened his selfhood; indeed he had had to put aside his soul.

The opening monologue suggests a parallel with Ibsen's verse drama *Brand*.⁴⁵⁹ *Brand* also begins with its protagonist struggling across a dead, snowy landscape (in his case a glacier). The dialogue of *Brand*'s opening scene emphasises the perilous risk that Brand is taking in pursuing his path. Like the Hunter, he wishes to remain independent of society, to stand outside the world of humanity by sheer force of will. In scene one of *The Great Highway* the choice to continue upward demands that the Hunter sacrifice all his attachments to the world, and that the choice itself involves an ultimate risk.

However, there is a further element to the symbolism here. The Hunter longs for a Buddhist detachment. He wants to observe the world as if from a mountain-top,

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid. The Swedish is written in iambs, which I have not attempted to reproduce.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 106

⁴⁵⁹ See Introduction, pp. 29-38

untouched by society and untouched by pain. He expresses this wish in a kind of aestheticism. The dust, the smoke, the breath of others had poisoned his blood, but he finds in the mountain

White, clean snow

Of sublimated vapour! Water-diamonds,

You are, lily-flowers by cold turned into stone.⁴⁶⁰

The mountainside is beautiful, but cold and lifeless. The snow resembles diamonds, which although beautiful are hard, although clear are sharp-edged; or it resembles petrified flowers. The imagery here connotes beauty and permanence, but also an existence that is hard and cold and unyielding. The Hunter himself apparently wishes to become like the snow, for he continues

Holy silence, draw your silken quilt

Up over the head of this tired wanderer.⁴⁶¹

The Hunter seems to desire here to become like the snow. He wants to be covered by the snow, to become a part of the mountain. He longs here to become as cold and hard and beautiful as the mountain itself. He expresses a wish for self-annihilation, albeit an aestheticised self-annihilation, which is at the same time a wish to attain an unchanging permanence.

The Hunter, then, wishes to escape the world. He seeks to recapture a sense of self that would be permanent and unchanging. At one point, he sees in the snow and the mountainside the possibility of a transfiguration into something as permanent and solid as stone – a permanence that is, ironically, indistinguishable from death.

⁴⁶⁰ Strindberg, *Samlade Verk*, vol. 62., p.106

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

The scene recalls *Brand* in a further sense. We examined, in the introduction, the relationship between *Brand* and Kierkegaard's "either/or". In this opening scene, the Hunter pauses by a signpost pointing in opposite directions. While he makes clear his wish to continue upwards, yet his stopping here also implies a reluctance to go farther. He faces an either/or choice. He must either continue upward or return to the valley, but stands there undecided. Midway through the scene, the Hermit enters asking

Quo vadis, wanderer?

You have come half-way and look behind you.⁴⁶²

This "quo vadis" appears to be ironic, as the Hunter does not know where he is going. He is trying to face two directions at once.

Finally, the Hunter finds that he cannot remain on the mountain. The Hermit convinces the Hunter that the self he lost in the world will not be found on a mountainside. A third character, the Wanderer, enters from above, and together he and the Hunter descend back into the world. There is here an ironic re-enactment of the descent that opens *A Dream Play*. In that instance, the descent was the incarnation of a daughter of the gods, descending quite literally from the heavens. Here the Hunter, having failed to escape the world of matter, of society, finds himself returning to it. This is the first station on the great highway, a title that becomes increasingly ironic.

The following two scenes are, as noted, largely satirical. Scene 2 ("By the Windmills") begins with the Wanderer and the Hunter sharing a dialogue in which each completes the other's sentences. Together with the way the Hermit addresses the

⁴⁶² Ibid., p. 108

Hunter as "wanderer" in the previous scene, this suggests that these two are aspects of the same man. Indeed, this scene contains reminders of the opening scene from *To Damascus*. The Wanderer is a drunkard, declaring "Because I am always lying on the operating table I have to chloroform myself."⁴⁶³ This line could have been spoken by the Unknown in his unregenerate state. Furthermore, the Hunter goes on to declare in Latin "Noli me tangere!"⁴⁶⁴ ("Don't touch me!"), recalling *To Damascus*'s Latin-speaking beggar. This splitting of characters serves here an obvious theatrical function – it allows the Hunter someone to talk to, instead of delivering a monologue, and gives him another character to play off. It also perhaps implies an alienation from himself. The Wanderer, whom the Hunter addresses as "Herr Inkognito,"⁴⁶⁵ drinks and jokes and lusts after women. He represents the 'lower' aspect of the Hunter, who takes an earnest attitude to life. While the Wanderer's happy cynicism undercuts the Hunter, the Hunter at times attains a kind of stature through his lyrical passages that the Wanderer does not. This implies that the protagonist is himself split in two. One part of him is an earnest idealist, the other a cynical scoffer.

While the Unknown's alter egos in *To Damascus* serve to increase the audience's sense of disorienting strangeness (a sense shared by the Unknown himself), the roles of the Hunter and the Wanderer are obvious. In the case of *To Damascus* the Unknown's alter egos also seemed intended to serve as warnings. That play suggests a trajectory from a sinful existence, through repentance to salvation – a trajectory that, I argue, the play itself also undercuts. We have already seen that the Hunter is seeking salvation (thus he asks the Miller E. "does this road lead to the Promised

⁴⁶³ Ibid., p. 116

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 117

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 116

Land?").⁴⁶⁶ Unlike the Unknown, who starts looking for redemption when he is reduced almost to madness, the Hunter is already seeking it. He contains within himself the contradiction between idealism and scepticism. This division recalls the statement from *The Son of a Servant*, "[h]is new self revolted against his old one, and for the rest of his life they fought with each other like an unhappy married couple who cannot get a divorce."⁴⁶⁷

The divided self of the Hunter/Wanderer bears, also, a relationship to Kierkegaard. They descend into the world but wish to remain aloof from it. In the Wanderer's case, he is living in what Kierkegaard calls the aesthetic: he passes through life fixed on enjoying himself, and therefore wants to remain detached. The Hunter, on the other hand, also wants to remain detached, but his reasons are more serious: he does not want to lose his self in the world. He desires his independence as part of a serious commitment to attaining spiritual freedom.

The social satire in scene 2 consists in part of an ironic replay of the battle of the sexes, and in part plays on the difficulties of the Hunter and the Wanderer in remaining uninvolved and aloof from the world. On each side of the stage are two windmills, Adam and Eve (named after two actual mills in Stockholm at that time). Miller A. accuses Miller E. of stealing the east wind and damaging his business, while Miller E. accuses Miller A. of stealing the west wind. The argument takes on theological dimensions. Miller A.'s argument gives a taste of the satire here:

Miller A.: But my mill was here first, and yours was built on wickedness. As

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 124

⁴⁶⁷ Strindberg, *The Son of a Servant*, p. 154

it's going badly for both of us now, it would be better if it went well
for *one!*

Miller E.: You mean for you? [...] I have a better grain-filter than you, and
my Eve mills faster, it turns more easily and it's got new sails.

Miller A.: But my Adam was built before yours, my mill-screw is made of
boxwood...⁴⁶⁸

The satire achieves an ironic distance, in part by the substitution of two mills as the source of contention, in part by the fact that Miller A. and Miller E. are both male. There is also a suggestion that this forms a play within the play, the Hunter and the Wanderer telling each other

Hunter: The play is about to start! An idyll with windmills,

Wanderer: a pastoral in minor-major; pay attention now!⁴⁶⁹

This is, in effect, a kind of marital squabble. It manages to be both a satire on marriage and on possession of worldly goods.

However, the Hunter and the Wanderer find themselves drawn into the argument when Miller E. suggests they appeal to these strangers to arbitrate their dispute. Gradually they find themselves the object of a lawsuit from Miller E. and flee to the next village.

The satire continues in the next scene, "In Eselsdorf." Eselsdorf, the name of the village, is German, signifying "the village of asses." (The village they have just left was called Lügenwald, "the forest of liars.") In part the satire is aimed at contemporary political wrangling, and in part at one of Strindberg's Swedish critics.

⁴⁶⁸ Strindberg, *Samlade Verk*, vol. 62, pp.119-20

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 119

It also makes the broader point that the world is run by idiots. The Schoolmaster, although amiable, spouts dubious learning while the Smith, the village's despot, rules by intimidation. The Wanderer, trying to talk his way out of the village without getting arrested, engages in a kind of vaudeville double-act with the Smith. The following is typical of their exchanges:

Smith: [...] well, go then! But make sure you come back!

Wanderer: Don't you understand that if you go then you have to come back again...

Smith: But wait a minute: what goes and goes and never comes back?

Wanderer: That's a clock, but we're not clocks, so we'll come back!

[...]

Smith: [...] That's logical; I like everything in life to be logical; and I can only follow a strict logical argument...

Wanderer: Then you mustn't follow us, as we are not a logical argument!⁴⁷⁰

The lines are short, fast-paced and full of gags. The humour of the lines comes from the literal-mindedness with which they apply logic. There may, then, be another satirical target here. In his naturalistic phase Strindberg had embraced science and rationality with an irrational fervour. After his Inferno crisis he had stopped believing that the rational mind could apprehend reality. Thus the school-scene in *A Dream Play* uses the strict application of logic to make a nonsensical mess.⁴⁷¹

In scene 4 ("An Arcade in the City") the tone becomes darker. The setting is the city Thofeth, a name Strindberg found in the Old Testament. The Hunter has lived here

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 151-2

⁴⁷¹ In this scene, the Officer "proves" by analogy that since one times one equals one, two times two must equal two. The Schoolmaster replies that although the proof accords entirely with the laws of logic, the answer is wrong. Strindberg, *Till Damaskus/ Ett Drömspel*, pp. 158-161

many years before, and finds himself surrounded by painful memories, as well as a nightmarish collection of shopkeepers. About half-way through the scene, the Hunter meets the only sympathetic character in *Thofeth*, the Japanese Man. Like the Hunter at this point, he has grown tired of life and asks the Hunter's help in dying. In the play's most extraordinary passage (remember that this was written in 1909), the Japanese Man, who says he comes from Hiroshima, describes how he wishes to die:

Japanese Man: [...] I will take a sleeping draught so that I seem to be dead –
you will have me put into a coffin, which will be driven to the
crematorium...

Hunter: But what if you wake up - ?

Japanese Man: That is just what I am counting on! For one moment I want to
feel the cleansing redeeming power of the fire – suffer a short time –
and so experience the bliss of liberation - ⁴⁷²

Strindberg clearly knew something of Japanese funerary customs, even if his knowledge was faulty. The Japanese Man tells the Hunter (correctly) that in Japan you take on a new name when you die, and that is the name to appear on your gravestone. The Japanese Man wants the name "Harahara to. That is: 'rustling leaves, rustling silk.'"⁴⁷³ He also requests an inscription, which he first gives in Japanese and then translates – somewhat awkwardly – as follows:

The diverting flowers –
why should I be angry?
I also – like them –
in accord with the will of the gods must perish!⁴⁷⁴

⁴⁷² Strindberg, *Samlade Verk*, vol. 62, p. 173

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 174

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.* The Japanese Man first speaks this verse in Japanese – transliterated into the Latin alphabet – before translating it for the Hunter. The *Samlade Verk* contains, also, a more elegant translation into

The "eternal name" chosen by the Japanese Man signifies that he has become, like a leaf in the breeze, a transient part of nature. This is further emphasized in the above verse. Just as flowers fall and die, so must he. He can only follow the path of the world, and there is nothing to get angry about in this. The beauty of the images implies that there is something aesthetic in a graceful acceptance of impermanence. As images of nature, they also imply that we are part of the natural order, unable to stand outside it or to move beyond it. The Japanese Man's self-annihilation is, then, the destruction of his ego. In the fire, he will find liberation from his sense of selfhood. This fire, however, leaves only ashes. The wish of the Japanese Man to awaken in the fire then perish reiterates the aesthetic self-annihilation hinted at in scene 1. In his liberating transformation in the flames, he will also have sacrificed himself and ceased to exist.

The following two scenes are relatively brief. In scene 5 ("In the Park outside the Crematorium") the Hunter finds an occasion for reflecting on death. This includes an attack on the Swedish writer Gustaf af Geijerstam. The import of this scene is the finality of death. Observing all the urns in niches, the Hunter asks

What do I see? A collection of urns

[...]

A columbarium, a dove-house;

But no dove, no olive branch –

Merely husks, the corn grows somewhere else.⁴⁷⁵

modern Swedish, which makes the import clearer: "How can I be bitter if the flowers fall,/ when I myself can only follow the world's path ...?" p. 275

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 183

He sees death as the end, here, seemingly without hope of redemption. The scene continues in this sombre vein, as the Hunter and the Japanese Man reflect on the vanity of life. The Hunter reveals that he had been a preacher, but his idealism simply did not fit the world. Life requires painful compromises, as both the Japanese Man and the Hunter have discovered.

In scene 6, the Hunter revisits his family home, finding to his relief that his own child does not recognize him, but considers someone else her father, and is happy. The overall effect is mawkish, although it held a personal significance for Strindberg, who had suffered terrible pangs of guilt over his bad relations with his children.

The final scene takes place in a dark forest. The Hunter is now utterly alone. The Wanderer has long since left him, the Japanese Man is dead, and his family have become strangers. The scene consists in large part of the Hunter expressing his disillusionment and scepticism. His first interlocutor is the Woman (who may be supernatural – at first only her voice is heard, and at the end of their conversation she “disappears.” The Hunter calls her “Satan,” and while this may simply be an insult, it may mean the Woman is either supernatural, or possibly a hallucination.) The Woman asks the Hunter about the various stages of his life. He had at one time been an advocate, “but when they tricked me into pitying an unjust person [...] I abandoned the cause of the unrighteous.”⁴⁷⁶ The Hunter had similarly given up preaching, after he found that he could not live what he taught. He also found that even his best feelings led him into committing injustices.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 203

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid.

Much of the scene consists of a more or less veiled defence of Strindberg himself. He had had a tempestuous life, much of it spent either attacking others or defending himself. Thus when the woman accuses the Hunter of lacking compassion for his fellow man, the Hunter angrily replies "Did you ever see anyone have compassion for me?"⁴⁷⁸ He asserts that he has confessed his faults in public, and that the whole of society benefited, largely because hearing of another's faults made people feel themselves to be more virtuous.

Finally the Tempter enters, attempting to lure the Hunter away from the forest with the offer of a well-paid job, on condition that he behaves like "a person, an ordinary person."⁴⁷⁹ The Hunter replies that he could not behave in accordance with his ideals in society, but under others' influence believed lies, "counted with false terms, used counterfeit currency without knowing it; that's why I am not who I am."⁴⁸⁰ For this reason, he has decided to become a woodsman, standing outside society in an attempt to recapture an authentic sense of selfhood.

The plot as a whole evokes a number of motifs: a descent into the material world reminiscent of the Neo-Platonic descent into generation in *A Dream Play*; life as a vale of tears; the world as a ship of fools. The sociologist Max Weber, in his lecture "Science as a Vocation," declares that the progress of European rationality has caused the world to become "disenchanted."⁴⁸¹ Modernity has thus inherited a world denuded of divine beings and barren of deeper meaning. According to Weber, we face a stark choice: face up to a life in this disenchanted world or, if we are not strong

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 206

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 207

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁸¹ Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in: Lawrence Cahoon, *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 170

enough, retreat into the arms of traditional religion. He regards the latter as an honourable alternative, although here the Church becomes essentially a home for the weak-minded.

The absence of depth, the world as a meaningless surface without any centre, is the nihilism born as Christianity fades. In this sense, the play consists of the Hunter's attempt to overcome nihilism. Does he succeed? The answer, in the end, must be no. *The Great Highway* reverses the trajectory of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The latter begins with its protagonist lost in the forest of the material world, but after a descent into the inferno, he ascends through purgatory and the heavens to reach the Empyrean. *The Great Highway* begins half-way up a mountain as the Hunter pauses on his ascent out of the world, and ends in a dark forest. He finds himself trapped in the world, though he wishes to maintain his separation and thereby some small piece of personal independence.

The play's title, then, is deeply ironic. The "great highway" leads nowhere. In the final scene, the Hunter finds himself

Alone! – Lost the way –

In the dark! - ⁴⁸²

It is all the more ironic, given the play's subtitle: *Ett vandringsdrama med sju stationer* ("a wandering-play with seven stations"). Like the Unknown in the latter half of *To Damascus*, the Hunter moves through seven stations. Yet the final destination is not redemption, but exile.

⁴⁸² Strindberg, *Samlade Verk*, vol. 62, p. 201

It could be argued that this predicament is peculiarly European and Christian. In his reading of Kafka's short story "Metamorphosis," Kiyoshi Tsuchiya finds a basic contrast between the Christian response to a "disenchanted world" and that of Chinese Buddhism (although Tsuchiya's viewpoint is perhaps closest to Taoism here). The writings of the Taoist sage Chuang Tzu contains, like Kafka, an account of a metamorphosis:

Once Chuang Chou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Chuang Chou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable Chuang Chou. But he did not know if he was Chuang Chou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Chou.⁴⁸³

In contrast Gregor Samsa, the protagonist of Kafka's tale, awakens in his bedroom to find that he has become a beetle. He lies helplessly on his back, waving his useless legs in the air. Chuang Tzu's butterfly remains, like himself, a part of nature and change does not trouble him. And while the butterfly flies freely Samsa finds himself imprisoned in his room. As Tsuchiya points out, the butterfly is in its place and in harmony with the cosmos, while the beetle is out of place, imprisoned and "entirely stripped of his cosmological relevance."⁴⁸⁴

Strindberg clearly saw that the Taoist/Buddhist acceptance of change was an option. By embracing his own transformation by fire the Japanese Man accepts impermanence. This is emphasised by his choice of "eternal name" and the verse he wishes to have inscribed on his gravestone, as we have seen. The mutability and

⁴⁸³ Quoted Kiyoshi Tsuchiya, "Human Existence in Buddhism and Christianity: A Buddhist Perspective," in Perry Schmidt-Leukel (ed.), *Buddhism and Christianity in Dialogue: The Gerald Weisfeld Lectures 2004* (London: SCM Press, 2005), pp. 59-60

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 62

mortality of worldly things is accepted, as is the corollary of the mutability and perishability of his own ego. Strindberg treats this character with great respect. His ending is dignified and even, from a certain point of view, beautiful. Nevertheless, this refusal to grasp and preserve his ego is represented here as self-annihilation. The Hunter's insistence on trying to find and then hold onto a permanent unchanging self makes this option impossible.

Tsuchiya characterises the difference between Kafka and Chuang Tzu as the contrast between the cosmological and the relational ego: "Since the Tao is 'a thing', at the event of our union we are no longer a person. In contrast, if the absolute is a person, even at our union with the absolute we remain personal and relational."⁴⁸⁵ In the first scene, we saw, the Hunter sees the possibility of a self-transcendence that would also mean an abandonment of ego. He wishes to become like the snow and the rock. But in the end he must reject this, because he wishes to preserve his 'relational ego.'

The Hunter then wanders through the world accompanied by his alter ego. This is not the joyful fluttering of a butterfly, but the anguished journey of one who has cast off his moorings and finds himself adrift. He says he has "thrown out my ballast, everything that weighed me down."⁴⁸⁶ Later, having lost the Wanderer, he declares "Man overboard!"⁴⁸⁷ Despite his efforts to steer a course, he drifts along at the whim of tides and breezes.

All that is left to the Hunter, in the end, is an assertion of faith by sheer will in the face of his own profound disillusionment. The Japanese Man, trying to console the

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 59

⁴⁸⁶ Strindberg, *Samlade Verk*, vol. 62, p. 106

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 163

Hunter, tells him his ideals are "a reminder, / A hope, a beacon to sail towards."⁴⁸⁸ So in the final scene, he tells the Woman "you should believe in God."⁴⁸⁹ Given his situation, this utterance becomes unintentionally ironic. In the play's closing monologue, the Hunter prays:

O Eternal one! I will not release your hand,
 Your hard hand, before you bless me!
 Bless me [...]
 Who suffered most from the pain
 That I could not be who I wanted!⁴⁹⁰

He utters this monologue lost and alone in a dark forest. The world has trapped him. The play experiments with ways of dealing with this predicament, but ultimately the Hunter can find no way out. He holds onto a faith in an external, personal deity by an act of will. By retaining a personal God, he may also preserve his self. But his final statement of faith, moving as it is, moves ultimately as pathos.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 189

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 202

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., pp. 210-11

6. Conclusion.

This thesis explores the paradoxical religious turn in some of Strindberg's later plays - a religious turn that issued in doubt, ambiguity and pessimism. Thus in his final play, *The Great Highway*, he turns Dante on his head: the Hunter begins the play heading out of the world towards an airless Empyrean, and ends it lost in a forest at night.

Whatever faith Strindberg the man embraced, in his plays he again and again undercuts himself. While these plays are certainly modernist, in the sense that the locus of meaning has become the individual self inhabiting a cosmos denuded of significance, we can also discern in them an anticipation of the postmodern rupturing of grand narratives. All these plays contain an internal antagonism, as viewpoints are tested and found wanting. Thus the pilgrimage reluctantly undergone by the Unknown in *To Damascus* ends exactly where the play began. He has not, I argue, moved forward; rather he has ultimately remained in the same place. This undermines the manner in which the play itself tries to force you to read it as moving towards a telos. *A Dream Play* measures the vision of a cosmic harmony against the mundane experience of everyday life. While it certainly does not dismiss the former, nor does it finally resolve the tension between them. The Chamber Plays all in their various ways display an uncomfortable awareness of a void that may be the nihilistic negation of all values - or may be a liberating groundlessness. In all these plays, no single interpretation of the world is adequate. Nor is any rational synthesis attainable. We are left with experiences of the world, confrontations with the abyss, and sometimes with intimations of a divine groundlessness. If someone objects that this sounds incoherent, Strindberg could well reply that he is reflecting the incoherence of

life.⁴⁹¹ Furthermore, although the locus and measure of any meaning in life has shifted to the individual self, the self is continually threatening to fall apart. Thus some of these plays proliferate with alter egos, threatening the unity of the self. This internal rupturing of the self caused Strindberg pain, and we saw how, in *The Great Highway*, his protagonist struggles to locate and maintain an enduring, authentic selfhood. Rather than a point-like, autonomous self, these plays discover a self that is always conditioned and always reactive. No-one is inherently good or inherently evil. Character is by and large a product of circumstances, the result of being born into the kind of world we inhabit. In this sense Strindberg's vision endorses original sin. However, he also has difficulty seeing the justice in the condemnation of human beings for an act they did not themselves commit.

These plays thus anticipates the predicament confronting some of those broadly postmodern thinkers who have attempted to construct a non-foundational theology. Paul Tillich's Christian existentialism, while not yet postmodern, finds that theology must begin from the individual's orientation towards an "ultimate concern." This ultimate concern is itself embodied in a language of symbols.⁴⁹² This is theology that begins, as it were, from below. Don Cupitt, the "bad boy" of Anglican theology, in his *Taking Leave of God* advances an internalised Christianity. He rejects the realist idea of an external, law-making God, instead turning God into an internalised voice, a kind of ideal. While he leaves the door just very slightly open towards some kind of transcendent God, his view is almost indistinguishable from atheism. Jean-Luc Marion uses postmodernism to try to recapture a God anterior to metaphysics. More recently, the "Radical Orthodoxy" group that formed around John Milbank has used

⁴⁹¹ He made a similar claim about the apparent 'incoherence' of the character of Hamlet. See above, p. 184

⁴⁹² See above, pp. 78-9, 80

postmodern thinking in a profoundly conservative move to circumvent the Enlightenment critique of religion and re-establish the legitimacy of an old-fashioned ecclesial Christianity. This is a small and not necessarily representative sample, but they share an attempt to circumvent the history of western metaphysics, which has in general equated God and being and tried to use this as a foundation stone for an all-encompassing metaphysical system. It is also notable how many postmodern theologians have had recourse to the negative theology of Christian mysticism, especially that of Eckhart and Dionysus the Areopagite.

Strindberg was at his most brilliant as a destructive thinker. In this he resembles his one-time correspondent, Friedrich Nietzsche.⁴⁹³ However, he was also a deeply paradoxical thinker. His destructive attacks were driven by a sincere and anguished seeking for transcendence. This lends Strindberg's religious turn its visionary apocalyptic strain. It almost seems that he cannot hope to find transcendence except at the end of a total and destructive negation. In this, as in other ways, he resembles the founder of the *Theatre of Cruelty*, Antonin Artaud (1896-1948). Artaud despised what he saw as the corruption of western civilization, and sought a renewal of the west from mythic and ritual roots – a renewal, however, that can only come at the cost of destruction. Thus he became theatre's apocalyptic visionary.

We will return to this below, but first, having looked at Strindberg in a postmodern context, I want to place him in the context of the post-postmodern condition. This is

⁴⁹³ Harold Borland argues convincingly that while the specifically Nietzschean influence on Strindberg's writings was thin, their temperaments and viewpoints converged around the time of their correspondence (which occurred just before Nietzsche went mad). The emotional impact of Nietzsche's thinking was, however, explosive. Indeed, as Borland puts it, Nietzsche's main effect on Strindberg was "providing him with dynamite!" Borland, *Nietzsche's Influence on Swedish Literature*, pp. 45-6

in part because, for all that he anticipates certain features of postmodernism, Strindberg is not in the end postmodern. He is not postmodern because, for Strindberg, the death of God is a profoundly religious moment, both liberating and tragic. The death of God also has the potential to become a rebirth – a rebirth of, in David Klemm's phrase, the God who appears when the God of theism disappears.⁴⁹⁴ In this respect, Strindberg has some resonance with the concerns of the emerging Theological Humanism. Broadly speaking, Theological Humanism tries to steer a middle course between the postmodern emptying of culture into a surface play of signs on the one hand, and a retrenchment into a highly conservative theism on the other. As outlined by David Klemm, Theological Humanism entails an engagement with Socrates' basic question: what sort of life should human beings live. In Klemm's words, it confronts "the fundamental challenges ... to the possibility of sustainable life on this planet and to a human life worth living."⁴⁹⁵ Secondly, it rejects exclusivist claims on behalf of any particular religious tradition. Thirdly, it recognises an innate human "spiritual capacity to long for and respond to divine transcendence."⁴⁹⁶ This capacity finds expression in the world's religious traditions, but not only or even primarily there. Now Strindberg's religious turn speaks to each of these themes. The first, a broad ethical and even existential engagement, pervades all the plays examined in this thesis. Each of them questions whether there is, or can be, any moral ordering in the world. This is at times used as an indictment against a Creator that is apparently indifferent to suffering. Whilst Strindberg's concern for human suffering found expression in his socialism, in his plays he reaches the pessimistic conclusion that suffering is inherent in life and fundamentally

⁴⁹⁴ David Klemm, *Theology and the End of Art* (forthcoming paper in *Literature and Theology*), p. 7

⁴⁹⁵ David Klemm, "Introduction: Theology of Culture as Theological Humanism" in *Literature and Theology*, vol. 18, no. 3, September 2004, p. 239

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 240-1

irremediable. As he puts in *A Blue Book*, "it isn't easy to be a human being. It is almost impossible."⁴⁹⁷ It is perhaps because of this that, while Strindberg the man could be wildly vituperative towards his enemies, especially if they had once been friends, Strindberg the playwright rarely judges or condemns anyone. As playwright he adopts the position of the dreamer in the foreword to *A Dream Play*: he neither condemns nor acquits, he only relates his narrative. This issues in a compassion for all, including even the vampiric Hummel in *Ghost Sonata* and the Dean of Theology in *A Dream Play*.

The second theme, above, the rejection of exclusivist claims also finds a response in Strindberg. Strindberg's eclecticism would, in any case, have disinclined him from making exclusive religious claims for any sect or tradition, but this rejection goes deeper. For Strindberg, religion is important because it responds to the existential conditions of being human. Christianity as a doctrinal system held little interest for him. For Strindberg, religion does not begin with the presumption of an ontological God, which could then be treated as a propositional truth that founds a system of ideas. Rather, religion begins with the experience of being human. So, while religion became for Strindberg a necessity, theology was for him impossible. I explore this further below.

However it is the third theme, the longing for and response to divine transcendence that I want to focus on here above all. Theological Humanism has tried to retrieve the language of transcendence, a kind of language that postmodernism has brought into

⁴⁹⁷ Strindberg, *Samlade Verk*, vol. 65, p. 56

disrepute. With it has returned a concern for "depth of meaning."⁴⁹⁸ What is interesting here is the way this language is used. Klemm, in particular, shies away from positive statement. He has taken account of postmodernism to the extent that he does not use the language of transcendence as a transcendental signifier whose role is "to center and regulate systematically the processes of interpretation, the unveilings of truth."⁴⁹⁹ Rather, he approaches transcendence by way of negations.

Indeed, the kind of God-language emerging in Klemm bears at least a family resemblance to apophatic discourse. As used by, for instance, Michael Sells this refers not to a particular tradition but to a mode of discourse that emerges in, it seems, virtually all religious traditions at certain points. This is language that confronts the dilemma of transcendence – that the transcendent cannot be named – by turning back on itself and undoing its own statements.⁵⁰⁰ For Sells, the fundamental apophatic gesture is exemplified in a passage from Plotinus' *Ennead* 6.4.7. Plotinus asks us to imagine a glowing mass in the centre of a hollow sphere, so that light is present over every part of the sphere.

If someone should take out the corporeal mass, but preserve the power of the light, would you then speak of where the light was? ... No longer can you say where it was first located, and no longer can you say whence and how it came.⁵⁰¹

As Sells puts it, the hand of the author reaches back into the image to remove a delimiting element. It "reach[es] into the notion of contemplating something, and

⁴⁹⁸ Klemm, "Theology of Culture as Theological Humanism," p. 240

⁴⁹⁹ Vincent B. Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism: An Advanced Introduction* (London: Hutchinson, 1983), p. 32

⁵⁰⁰ Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 2-10

⁵⁰¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 18

withdraw[s] the 'some-thing.'"⁵⁰² Such linguistic moves undo reference to a realist God. We must either remain silent, or live within the paradoxical tension of an apophatic unsaying. The appeal of an apophatic form of discourse in an age when positive statements about God have come to seem suspect is obvious. In a disenchanted, post-metaphysical world, unsaying seems to offer the only remaining path towards transcendence. But this is a transcendent emptied of content. It offers little scope for a transcendent personal God with whom we can have a relationship.

Apophasis involves then a dis-ontology – an undoing of the language of substance and being. As noted, it has become a resource for a number of broadly non-foundational theologies precisely because of this. Strindberg, I have argued, confronts his audience with the dilemmas that have made a non-foundational theology seem necessary, a situation that has made apophasis attractive to many recent religious thinkers. Indeed, Strindberg seems in his plays uncomfortably aware of the potential for a theological unsaying. It causes discomfort because it leaves no room for the kind of personal God Strindberg craved. It therefore threatens to open an abyss, and the prospect this opens may turn out to be indistinguishable from atheism.

But apophasis is, as Sellis emphasises, *performative*. The tension between saying and unsaying is inherently dramatic. As a dramatist, Strindberg does not end by leading his audience to a monological conclusion. At his best, he places his audience within contradictions – and the audience finds that it has to live within these contradictions. Might Strindberg, potentially, open onto the possibility of a theatrical unsaying? I return to this in my broader consideration of theatre below.

⁵⁰² Ibid.

But first I ought to say explicitly here, because it is implicit in what follows, that postmodern thinking implies an anthropology no less than theological thinking. That is to say, postmodernism implies a view of what a human being is and above all of what a human mind is: constituted in language and constrained by the net of signifiers which it can never escape. In what follows, I take issue with this.

The agonised tension within Strindberg's later work is summed up by Strindberg himself in a passage from *Inferno*, in which he addresses the Powers that seemed alternately to guide and to chastise him, although he could never be sure of their beneficence :

In my youth I was a free-thinker. Of the free-thinker you made an atheist, of the atheist a monk. Inspired by the humanitarians, I extolled socialism. Five years later you showed me the absurdity of socialism. You have cut the ground from under all my enthusiasms, and suppose that I now dedicate myself to religion, I know for a certainty that before ten years have passed you will prove to me that religion is false.⁵⁰³

This passage is a tightly-wound self-contradiction, declaring to the Powers in whom he believes in a quite literal way that he cannot become a believer – he could not sustain his belief because they would undermine it. This reluctance to commit himself arises in part from fear that if he submits to a system it will trap him. When he reverted to Christianity (for despite the passage above he did, in the end, count himself a Christian), he did so because he found it “the only possible form of spiritual

⁵⁰³ Strindberg, *Inferno*, p. 262

life for me. In my great need I took what lay to hand..."⁵⁰⁴ Strindberg looked to Christianity to meet his acute psychological and religious crises. Indeed, in *Inferno* he describes Swedenborg's role in overcoming these crises as something between an exorcist and a physician.⁵⁰⁵ Christianity was not, for Strindberg, a coherent set of doctrines about God and the world to which he assented. It was a palliative medicine that allowed him to endure his illness. In *Religiös Renässans*⁵⁰⁶ (Religious Renaissance) he describes religion as, fundamentally, a binding together of two worlds. For Strindberg this "makes it possible to live."⁵⁰⁷ The pamphlet, subtitled "Religion against Theology," goes on to reject the systematic edifice of dogma. The systematic formulation of religious belief seeks to fix the invisible and make it material. Religion then turns into private property that must be defended from the property-owners of other sects and other religions. The resulting conflict arises partly from a desire for power (an expression of Nietzsche's will to power), partly from the attempt to avoid enslavement by someone else's system. Strindberg points out that "Christ never propounded any system or any theology and nor did the Apostles."⁵⁰⁸ Strindberg, then, explicitly rejects religion as a system. He finds suspect anything that might enslave him. Besides, he is too interested in conflict to find comfort for long in one all-embracing view. As Gunnar Brandell says, Strindberg was not interested in building a system but in competing visions of the world.⁵⁰⁹ Strindberg's plays do not put forward a coherent view of the world, and this is an advantage. He poses questions and leaves us with dilemmas. He does not offer certainty. To this extent,

⁵⁰⁴ August Strindberg, *Samlade Verk*, vol. 68 (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1988) p. 213. Strindberg's emphasis.

⁵⁰⁵ Strindberg, *Inferno*, pp. 256-7, 261

⁵⁰⁶ Subtitled *Religion mot Teologi* (Religion against Theology) – this was a pamphlet Strindberg published in 1910, very near the end of his life.

⁵⁰⁷ Strindberg, *Samlade Verk*, vol. 68, p. 205

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁹ Brandell, *Strindberg in Inferno*, p. 161

he resembles Peter Baelz's half-religious man: he has "heard 'a rumour of angels', and seen what look like signals of the transcendent. But the world without and the world within also speak of a divine absence, threatening destruction and opening up an ultimate emptiness and void."⁵¹⁰ Given this deep-seated suspicion of world-encompassing systems, it is little wonder that Strindberg so often alludes in his plays to Christ as liberator. He comes to free humanity, and in return the 'right-thinking people' kill him. Divine intervention disrupts established hierarchies. Always in Strindberg it undermines the social order, but it also undercuts systematic dogma and claims to power based on this. In short, it undermines the authority of the usual kind of metaphysical God-language, in which God becomes the name for an ultimate being, a cosmic father-figure who props up the worldly order. It is a short leap from this to Gnosticism.

This broadly Gnostic tendency becomes rather interesting in light of the postmodern appropriation of Antonin Artaud. As well as a poet and an actor, Artaud was a theatrical visionary seeking an escape from what he saw as the smallness of contemporary theatre. Western theatre seemed to him trapped in narrow social and psychological concerns, "whether we will become aware of our 'complexes' ... or whether on the contrary our 'complexes' will do us in."⁵¹¹ He sought, in contrast, a kind of poetry of the stage that would lead us "away from the human, contemporary, and psychological meaning of the theatre and back to the religious and mystical acceptance of which our theatre has lost all sense."⁵¹² Like Strindberg in his more pessimistic moments, Artaud "shares with the Gnostics a conviction that the world of

⁵¹⁰ Baelz, *The Forgotten Dream*, p. 36

⁵¹¹ Antonin Artaud, *Selected Writings*, trans. Helen Weaver (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 234

⁵¹² *Ibid.*, p. 239

forms is a false creation, that it continues to be governed and directed through the work of evil, and that he is trapped in it."⁵¹³ In fact, so similar are many of their concerns, it is no surprise that Artaud considered some of Strindberg's late work to belong to the repertory of an ideal theatre.⁵¹⁴ Artaud wanted a theatre that escaped the tyranny of dialogue with all that it entailed, which embraced a language of movement and gesture, as well as turning the spoken word into something closer to music, and in fact into incantation. It was for this reason that he caught the attention of Jacques Derrida, who sees in Artaud an escape from what he calls the "theological stage."⁵¹⁵ Artaud's theatre of cruelty no longer serves "as the sensory illustration of a text already written ... [The stage] will no longer *re-present* a present that would exist elsewhere and prior to it."⁵¹⁶ Now while Strindberg's late plays are still dominated by language, they do attempt to move beyond a theatre of dialogue. In Swedish, his dramatic writing is full of dashes and ellipses. He had a particular rhythm in mind. The sound, rhythm and register of the language becomes at times as important as its meaning. Indeed, Strindberg gives a description of the process of composition in a scene from *To Damascus*. In it the Unknown says that he first hears a rhythm, before particular words arise to fit that rhythm.⁵¹⁷ His evocative use of music and his attention to visual changes onstage (particularly notable in *A Dream Play*) also reflect a move beyond a purely psychological, or indeed social theatre. These latter are precisely the kind of "theological theatre" that Artaud attacks. We have seen the way in which Strindberg's plays disrupt or indefinitely prolong the redemptive drama of the Passion, leaving the theistic God forever out of reach. These plays then do not only undermine the coherence of their own salvific narratives, they also move away

⁵¹³ Jane Goodall, *Artaud and the Gnostic Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 17

⁵¹⁴ Artaud, *Selected Writings*, p. 163

⁵¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 235

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 237

⁵¹⁷ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus / Ett Drömspel*, p. 46

from a theological, logocentric theatre. Now according to one recent interpretation of Artaud's Gnosticism, Gnosticism itself functions as a repressed but disruptive force within the orthodox discourse of Christian theology.⁵¹⁸ Like the Freudian unconscious it forever threatens to break out and disrupt the rational ordering of the cosmos. This sort of language, the language of disruption, combined with a language obsessed by the holy, characterises a strain of modernist writing on the theatre, and, I believe, has something to say to our current situation at the end of postmodernism. As a way of approaching this, I want to set this language against a modern attempt at an objective language of theatre criticism. I have picked on Colin Counsell here because he formulates his argument with particular clarity.

In the introduction to his *Signs of Performance*, Colin Counsell addresses the question "what is theatre"? It is, he answers, a system of signs used to communicate messages and, more importantly, ideologies (in the Marxist sense) to an audience. "The key characteristic of such [cultural] products, the quality which makes them cultural, is that they all encode meaning. Cultural objects are readable."⁵¹⁹ The sign system employed by theatre involves not just words but posture, movement and staging. The most important thing here is that a theatrical event is readable as a whole. So strong is the force of this that the audience will interpret accidents onstage as intentional parts of the play. Even performances that are deliberately fragmentary do not escape this "Law of the Text" for those discords and fragments will themselves be woven into one coherent meaning. For Counsell, a theatrical event, like the subjectivity of the audience that watches, is conditioned by and passes on the historically bound conditions of its production.

⁵¹⁸ Goodall, *Artaud and the Gnostic Drama*, passim

⁵¹⁹ Colin Counsell, *Signs of Performance: An Introduction to Twentieth Century Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 6

Now Counsell's project is explicitly political, and to the extent that he wants suppressed voices to be heard, one can only sympathise, despite the contempt with which he writes of "Dead White Bourgeois Males."⁵²⁰ And of course there is a great deal in what he says about theatre as a sign system (many of the same points were originally made by Brecht). However, his attempt at a more or less 'objective' view of theatre as a system of material signs excludes from theatre both the aesthetic and the 'spiritual'. The two terms are related, and although the latter is vague it points towards something of great importance. We will try to get closer to the relation between these two, and to their significance.

Counsell's insistence that a theatrical event is always 'read', and 'read' as a seamless whole is only partially true. Indeed, the rare experience of a truly exceptional theatrical performance contradicts this interpretation, both of theatre and of subjectivity. As a member of the University of Wales' drama department, Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe has noted that drama students typically become very fluent in analysing bad or mediocre plays in terms of staging, genre and so forth – precisely the kind of analysis that Counsell describes. This is an extended and refined version of what Counsell describes the ordinary theatre-goer as doing. When it comes to truly outstanding performances, however, this analytical activity stops: "The extraordinary performance, the performance that makes the spectators forget they are in the theatre, that makes them forget the passing of time, that engages them fully in the here and now, the present moment, somehow seems to escape the immediate analytical abilities

⁵²⁰ Ibid., p. 2

of the intellect.”⁵²¹ Even in retrospect, terminology becomes vague and those who experienced these events retain a reluctance to analyse them. Dinkgräfe’s students agreed unanimously that these rare theatrical experiences were much more desirable than those open to immediate critical analysis.⁵²² It seems, then, that theatre at its best does something that Counsell cannot account for, or more accurately does not even allow for. The spectator seems, under exceptional circumstances, to suspend the normal activity of ‘reading’ a performance. This suggests a parallel with Donald Kuspit’s description of aesthetic experience in *The End of Art*. It is, he says, “an altered state of consciousness, as it were, and thus an abnormal or at least a non-normal and unconventional consciousness of reality.”⁵²³ It allows an escape from “everyday consciousness of the life-world.”⁵²⁴ With echoes of Schopenhauer, Kuspit claims that the aesthetic has a healing effect, however temporary, and that in essence it gives us a reprieve from socially prescribed roles in defiance of the adult social world “which demands that one ... identify oneself completely with that role.”⁵²⁵ In other words, it seems to afford a momentary liberation. There is a close parallel here with Grotowski’s avowed aims for his “Poor Theatre”. His theatre was poor in the sense that it stripped away everything extraneous. Grotowski concluded that the only necessary conditions for theatre were an actor and a spectator: “we found that theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc. It cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, “live”

⁵²¹ Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe, “Consciousness and the Future of Theater,” in William S. Haney II and Peter Malekin (eds.), *Humanism and the Humanities in the Twenty-First Century* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2001), p. 103

⁵²² Ibid., p. 104

⁵²³ Donald Kuspit, *The End of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 2

⁵²⁴ Ibid., p. 9

⁵²⁵ Ibid., p. 12

communion."⁵²⁶ But his theatre's poverty did not consist in stripping away only the external paraphernalia of performance. It also aimed to strip away the actor's 'bag of tricks': "In this struggle with one's own truth, this effort to peel off the life-mask, the theatre with its full-fleshed perceptivity, has always seemed to me a place of provocation. It is capable of challenging itself and its audience by violating acted stereotypes of vision, feeling and judgment ... This defiance of taboo, this transgression, provides the shock which rips off the mask, enabling us to give ourselves nakedly to something which is impossible to define but which contains Eros and Caritas."⁵²⁷ He wishes, he says, to approach the holy by way of transgression and blasphemy. He aims to transmit this "secular holiness" (he disclaims any religious allegiance) to the audience: "If the actor ... through excess, profanation and outrageous sacrilege reveals himself by casting off his everyday mask, he makes it possible for the spectator to undertake a similar process of self-penetration."⁵²⁸ He describes this sacrilege also as sacrifice and atonement. For Grotowski theatre involves spiritual freedom, a freedom from roles, a removal of social masks. He uses notably violent language to talk about this, as well as language that is notably religious. Kuspit uses language that is less violent, but nevertheless deals with disruption. He says of Cézanne, for instance, that he "is intimidating and discomforting because [he] disrupts everyday consciousness."⁵²⁹ The painter Giorgio De Chirico speaks in similarly disruptive terms of the role of madness in art, defining madness after Schopenhauer as a loss of memory:

⁵²⁶ Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1991), p. 19

⁵²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21-22

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 34

⁵²⁹ Kuspit, *The End of Art*, p. 9

...that which constitutes the logic of our normal acts and our normal life is a continuous rosary of recollections of relationships between things and ourselves and vice versa.

We can cite an example: I enter a room, I see a man sitting in an armchair, I note a bird cage with a canary hanging from the ceiling ... None of this startles nor astonishes me because a series of memories which are connected one to the other explains to me the logic of what I see. But let us suppose that for a moment, for reasons that remain unexplainable and quite beyond my will, the thread of this series is broken. Who knows how I might see the seated man, the cage, the painting, the bookcase! Who knows with what astonishment, what terror and possibly also with what pleasure and consolation I might view the scene.⁵³⁰

In all these cases, neither the artist nor the audience is entirely constrained by cultural codes. Indeed, for all these artists and critics, the arts achieve most when the codes and the reading of codes break down. Grotowski actually calls his theatrical method a "via negativa."⁵³¹ Grotowski's appropriation of the term refers in part to his attempt to remove all that is extraneous to theatrical performance, but as we have seen, his theatrical method is also a disruption of roles, a ripping off of masks. His use of the term suggests a parallel with the apophatic disruption of semantics that occurs in a number of mystical writers, practitioners, properly speaking, of the via negativa. Grotowski seems to suggest that theatre too, in certain rare moments, reaches an apophatic disruption of its ordinary codes. Apophatic language operates, as Sells

⁵³⁰ Herschell B. Chipp (ed.), *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 450

⁵³¹ Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, p. 17

notes, with a performative intensity.⁵³² It is writing that does not say something, but *does* something. Can theatre provoke, at its greatest, a wordless groundless freedom? Peter Brook seems to allude to this possibility when he says "...for me, the theatre starts and ends within a bowl of emptiness, which is an empty space and a great silence."⁵³³

At first glance this might seem distant from the concerns of Theological Humanism. In Klemm's formulation, Theological Humanism involves a recognition of and rational balance between the demands of the "I", the "you", the "they" and the natural world and its creatures.⁵³⁴ And yet, he is concerned for the continued possibility of doing theology, and in the broadest sense for the continued possibility of religion. He explicitly rejects the path taken by what he calls post-liberal theology, which defends the special status of one particular sect or grouping against all others. Although he commits himself to working with the tradition he has inherited (in his case Roman Catholicism), he is concerned with the possibility of religious life whether or not contained within the Church – that is, with experience of the holy as potentially a universal human experience. As he does so, Klemm also resorts to the language of disruption. He invokes Rudolph Otto for whom religious experience occurs when the "Wholly Other, both divine and demonic, beyond good and evil, breaks into the structures of ordinary experience, disrupting its worldly contents and overturning our judgments about them."⁵³⁵ Klemm speaks tantalizingly of "the God who appears

⁵³² Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, pp. 5-6, 9-10

⁵³³ Quoted Counsell, *Signs of Performance*, p. 146

⁵³⁴ David Klemm, "Theology and the End of Art" (forthcoming paper in *Literature and Theology*), pp. 8-9

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6

when the God of theism disappears"⁵³⁶, and comments that "for postmodern theology nothing is sacred – or, I should say, not even nothing is sacred."⁵³⁷

In *A Dream Play* the revelation that the cloverleaf door, the door that hides the secret of existence, has nothing behind it scandalises the four Deans. For the Dean of Theology, the shock is so profound that he throws his book into the fire and abandons theology. Yet this emptiness is revealed by the daughter of God, who then tells the Deans that they have failed to understand. She seems to hint that this nothing is the 'great silence' Peter Brook alludes to, the nothing that is sacred.

In Chapter 2, I alluded to David Jenkins' assertion that theology needed to stand under the judgment of literature. It needed to be answerable to the mess of life, and until it was it would be glib. Strindberg again and again does precisely this - he tests religious claims against the mess of life. As ever, he does not do this in a systematic way that works towards a concluding statement, whether of atheism or belief. To do so would be antithetical to his way of thinking. It is important that *A Dream Play*, for instance, with its Neoplatonic overtones, includes so much of the ordinary dirt, poverty and injustice of life. To paraphrase David Klemm, Strindberg does not provide answers, but he does keep certain questions alive.⁵³⁸

As I have said, Strindberg inhabits the desert. He may not like this, but ultimately he is too honest to deny it. I want to bring in here David Jasper's *Sacred Desert*, a book that wanders through deserts literal and metaphorical and their resonances in literature

⁵³⁶ Ibid., p. 7

⁵³⁷ Ibid., p. 11

⁵³⁸ Ibid., pp. 6-7

and religious writings.⁵³⁹ I do this in part because Strindberg would seem to imply that the only possible religion, now, is a religion of the desert. David Jasper, in turn, perhaps implies that the space of literature is the only viable religious space left. In fact the desert is an apt metaphor for a writer who resists simple univocal readings the way Strindberg does. The desert itself, in David Jasper's description, resists categories - or rather categories collapse into each other in the desert. The desert is implacable, indifferent to human concerns. It is the implacable other to the human world, yet also offers an escape into silence and solitude. The journey into the desert carries a sense of nakedly confronting existence. It is a place also of strange meetings, of encounters with beings both holy and demonic. In the desert blessedness and damnation become indistinguishable. Now in a lot of the figures discussed earlier, the holy and the demonic intermingle. For Otto, the experience of the holy is an encounter with the absolutely other, both divine and demonic. It breaks into the world and disrupts our consciousness, indeed our subjectivity. Grotowski, again, sought holiness by way of sacrilege. A deliberate assault on the categories of holiness seems necessary in order to reach towards transcendence. Now Strindberg assaults conventional notions of piety, even as he seeks to submit to religious authority. But he also confronts the paradox present in Grotowski, and indeed in Otto. In Chapter 1 I discussed Falander, the character from the *Red Room* who is both saintly and diabolical.⁵⁴⁰ This kind of character recurs in the plays. In *To Damascus* it is the protagonist himself who resembles Falander. The Unknown is marked, like Cain, and feels himself cursed. Yet his curse also marks him as holy. He finds himself persecuted because he opposes the unjust ordering of the world. His writings threaten to undermine the social fabric that holds people in their place. But this opposition

⁵³⁹ David Jasper, *The Sacred Desert: Religion, Literature, Art and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004)

⁵⁴⁰ See above, pp. 60-1

extends to a protest against the ordering of nature and God's handiwork, also. The Unknown dreams of remaking the cosmos so that no-one will suffer. His alter-ego, the madman Caesar, busies himself reordering nature, finding God's design deficient. In this case, the Unknown's challenge to the divinely ordained order of the cosmos seems intended to show how depraved and corrupt the Unknown has become, before, in the play's second half, he follows Christ at least part-way to Golgotha. Unlike the more radical version of Christ, present in *To Damascus* as elsewhere, this is the Jesus mediated by the Church, the version of Christ propounded by Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor to whom the Unknown finally, if reluctantly, yields. And yet, the Unknown in his unregenerate state has a great deal of justice on his side. The play cannot entirely conceal its protest against conventional religiosity and ethical norms behind the mask of piety it tries to force onto its face. *A Dream Play* amplifies this protest. Here social injustice becomes symptomatic of a broader sense of outraged compassion at the meaningless suffering of humanity. The God of theism fails. As Altizer puts it, the God of a fallen humanity is a fallen God.⁵⁴¹ Instead, the Daughter discloses a void – apparently a sacred void, though it may be the void of nihilism. There is really no way of knowing. Certainly it undermines the authority of the Deans, and threatens the order upheld by the “right-thinkers.” Indeed, they wish to kill the Daughter, in an echo of the Poet's reference to Christ, murdered by the “right-thinking people” for attempting to free them.

A number of Strindberg's plays, then, express a longing for transcendence. Yet the closest they come to it is an intimation of an ambiguous emptiness. It seems that the transcendence sought – a transcendent God whose discovery also entails a

⁵⁴¹ Altizer, *The Descent into Hell*, p. 180

transformation of the self – cannot be reached. A divine ground as presence cannot be found. The only path left seems to lie at the end of a total negation and reversal – this entails a reversal of morality, a rejection of ecclesial Christianity, a negation of God. The possibility of this reversal, and the groundlessness it promises and threatens, haunts Strindberg's dream plays. In the end, Strindberg cannot quite commit himself to the ultimate risk of this reversal. His play writing has to end, therefore, with the Hunter alone in the forest of the world, praying to an absent God.

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